

DOCTOR WHO

EATER OF WASPS

TREVOR BAXENDALE

BBC

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The TARDIS lands in the sleepy English village of Marpling, as calm and peaceful as any other village in the 1930s. Or so it would seem at

first glance. But the village is about to get a rude awakening.

The Doctor and his friends discover they aren't the only time-travellers in the area: a crack commando team is also prowling the Wiltshire countryside, charged with the task of recovering an appallingly dangerous artefact from the far future – and they have orders to destroy the entire area, should anything go wrong.

And then there are the wasps. . . mutant killers bringing terror and death in equal measure. What is their purpose? How can they be stopped? And who will be their next victim?

In the race to stop the horror that has been unleashed, the Doctor must outwit both the temporal hit squad, who want him out of the way, and the local police – who want him for murder.

This is another in the series of original adventures for the Eighth Doctor.

DOCTOR WHO

B B C

EATER OF WASPS

TREVOR BAXENDALE

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and Konnie – with love* Contents

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Chapter One

‘It’s a very odd sensation,’ said Charles Rigby, ‘when you kill someone.’

He said this with some consideration, in much the same way that he said everything else. He liked to think of himself as a solid, reliable type. Almost unimaginative. There was safety in such self-control.

Rigby was sitting in his usual armchair, fiddling with a pipe. He was a long, ascetic-looking man, who habitually wore a tie and a comfortable old belted tweed jacket with patches on the elbows. He routinely spent his evenings listening to the wireless and smoking his pipe, unless Liam was visiting, in which case he would talk about his

experiences as a soldier.

Rigby watched the boy carefully to gauge his reaction. Liam was only fifteen, and Rigby was old enough to be his father. Rigby knew that the lad certainly looked up to him as a father figure, and he was acutely aware of the influence this relationship could exert on someone as impressionable – and lonely – as Liam.

The boy was staring back at Rigby with wide, appreciative eyes. ‘Tell me about it,’ he said.

Rigby dug in his jacket pocket for his matches. He wasted a few seconds striking one and setting the flame to his pipe. ‘Only did it the once, thank God.’

The boy’s eyes widened further.

‘We ended up clearing the Huns out face-to-face, as I said.’ Rigby spoke around his pipe, jetting smoke from his nose and lips. ‘*Mano-a-mano* as it were. Only it’s an ugly business, fighting at close quarters.’

The boy waited patiently for the details. At last Rigby removed his pipe and his eyes focused on the past. ‘The trench was thick with mud and as slippery as hell. I think the Germans were pretty scared – I know I was. The fellow I did for was sitting down on a duckboard. I remember thinking he looked very young, not much older than you are now, I suppose. His helmet was far too big for him! I remember that very clearly.

‘Well, for a moment we just stared at one another like fools. I was terrified.

I raised my rifle and shot him at point-blank range, right between the eyes.’

Rigby lowered the pipe as if it were his old rifle. His mouth felt dry.

‘What happened?’ asked Liam.

1

Rigby blinked. ‘Well, he died of course. Face just collapsed. Blood everywhere.’

There was a long silence. The boy knew better than to interrupt now.

‘Found his helmet afterwards. Had a hole in the back of it the size of

my fist. There was hair stuck to the edges. Yes, I remember that very clearly.'

The boy swallowed loudly, and Rigby returned his full attention to his pipe, puffing at it contemplatively. 'Sick as a dog, afterwards.'

For a full minute more they sat in silence; the only sound was the ticking of the carriage clock on the mantelpiece.

'Still want to join up?' Rigby asked gruffly.

'Of course,' replied the boy. 'I want to be a soldier, like you were.'

Rigby leaned forward. 'Listen, Liam: I'm trying to tell you that being a soldier isn't a glamorous occupation. Yes, you get a nice uniform and some shiny buttons. Bright lad like you might even make it as an officer. But a soldier's chief purpose is to kill the enemy – murder another human being.

It's not a pleasant business.'

'I know that. But that's not why I want to join the army. That's not why you joined, is it?'

'No. I joined because – well, I wanted to serve my King and Country. Do my bit for England.'

'Then so do I.'

Rigby sat back and sucked on his pipe. 'You know, your father wouldn't have wanted you to be a soldier.'

Liam's brown eyes flashed gold with anger. 'That's not true! My father won the George Cross! He was proud to fight for England!'

'I know all that. But where is he today, eh?'

Liam's shoulders slumped. 'That's not fair.'

'Exactly.' Rigby smiled at his small victory. 'Your father gave his life for England, Liam. He isn't here to advise you one way or another now. That isn't fair at all.'

Liam bit his lip and sniffed. 'Will you still show me the gun?'

Rigby sighed and put down his pipe. He crossed the room to his bureau and unlocked a slim drawer. Inside was an old oilcloth,

wrapped around something heavy. He brought it to the table and put it down with a resigned glance at Liam Jarrow. The lad was gazing eagerly at the object Rigby uncovered.

‘Webley .38,’ the boy recited. ‘Six-shot revolver with a walnut grip.’

It wasn’t loaded, of course. The cylinder was clearly empty, because Rigby kept the gun broken – that is, unhinged just forward of the trigger guard.

Liam picked up the pistol and clicked it shut. It was large and heavy in his small hand, the hexagonal barrel wavering slightly as he held it aloft.

2

‘Your mother would have my guts for garters if she knew I let you look at this,’ muttered Rigby. He regarded the weapon with disdain. Its oily black shape disgusted him. He really didn’t know why he kept it – except that it just seemed the thing to do at the end of the war. A lot of officers had kept their service revolvers when they returned to civilian life. The truth was, Rigby’s experiences in the Great War had been the most exciting and terrible time of his life, and there was a part of him that did not want to forget it.

But, even so, the sight of the gun in Liam’s pale hand turned his stomach.

‘Here,’ he said gently, taking the Webley back and placing it on the oilcloth.

‘I’ve got something else to show you.’

Liam was immediately curious. Rigby had only ever shown him the Webley before. Perhaps he thought Rigby still had the rifle stashed away somewhere

– or even that German’s blasted tin helmet with the hole in it!

Rigby led the way out through the small kitchen into the back garden. It was a bright summer’s evening, still warm even though the shadows were long across the neatly mown lawn.

‘I put it in the shed,’ Rigby explained, indicating the small wooden hut at the rear of the garden, just next to the vegetable patch that had provided all this year’s potatoes and carrots.

‘What is it?’ wondered Liam.

‘I don’t know. Found it in the vegetable patch earlier this week, when I was digging it over. I’ll show you it.’ Rigby produced a small key from his trouser pocket as they approached the shed. ‘Have to keep the wretched thing locked now. Tramps are always looking for somewhere to kip.’

He unlocked the small brass padlock that hung from the old hasp on the shed door. Liam peered past Rigby’s elbow into darkened space beyond as the door creaked open.

The interior smelled of old wood musk and engine oil. Garden tools were stacked against one wall, amid a number of wooden crates and an old lawn-mower. There was a workbench against the far side with a large iron vice bolted to its pitted edge. Next to the vice was an old shoebox. Liam sensed immediately that this contained whatever it was Rigby intended to show him.

He started forward but checked himself momentarily when a large wasp drifted up from behind the shoebox and headed for the door. Both Liam and Rigby ducked reflexively as it flew past them, heading for freedom.

‘Must’ve been trapped in here,’ grunted Rigby. He opened the box and removed a wad of newspaper. Nestled in the space beneath was a strange-looking object. It was about a foot long, and as thick as a man’s wrist. It was smooth and black, like ebony or charcoal.

‘What is it?’ asked Liam once more.

‘Don’t rightly know. Never seen anything like it before. Touch it.’

3

Liam pressed his fingertips against the black surface and jumped. ‘It’s warm!

It feels almost as though it was alive. . . ’

Rigby nodded. ‘That’s what I thought.’

Liam moved closer, picking the object up from its bed of newspaper. As he did so, his leg brushed an old paint tin lying on its side on a wooden box. The tin rolled off the box and fell to the floor with a clatter.

Both Liam and Rigby sensed rather than saw the initial disturbance. They instinctively looked down at the papery globe hidden behind the wooden crate, one half of it caved in by the paint tin. The cavity was full of teeming insects. Even as Liam and Rigby realised they were wasps, the insects rose up in an angrily buzzing cloud.

‘Get back!’ yelled Rigby, pulling the boy by his collar towards the door.

Wasps filled the shed, floating up to the ceiling and swirling towards the exit. Rigby yanked Liam out and knocked the door shut with his foot. A couple of wasps were already out, buzzing away down the garden. One or two stayed hovering by the shed as if waiting for the chance to go back inside.

Rigby locked the door with trembling fingers. ‘Phew! Won’t be able to go back in there for quite a while, I’m afraid.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Don’t worry, lad. Couldn’t be helped.’

‘I think I dropped the. . . thing you wanted to show me,’ Liam confessed miserably.

‘It’s all right. We’ll recover it when we’ve sorted out these damned wasps.’

Liam took a deep breath. ‘I think it’s time I was going home, anyway.’

‘Of course. Off you go, lad. See you again sometime.’

‘Yes. Thanks, Mr Rigby.’

Rigby gave a small wave that could have been a salute as the boy left.

Despite all his misgivings, he liked having Liam around; there couldn’t be that many lads of his age prepared to make friends with their dentist! Then, with a slightly wary glance at his wasp-filled shed, Rigby headed back to the house.

Inside the shed, Rigby’s strange black object had indeed been dropped. It had landed directly in the wasps’ nest, breaking easily through the papery shell and tipping it right over. Angry wasps spilled from the cavity.

One end of the object had snapped clean off, as though it were made

of glass, and lay on the floor. The exposed ends of the fractured pieces were glowing with a fierce electric green light.

A loud humming noise filled the shed as the wasps, still frenzied after their sudden release, attacked the glowing fragments. They covered the object in such numbers that soon the weird emerald light was totally obscured.

4

Chapter Two

The next morning, Miss Havers was approaching the small village of Marpling when she heard something most unusual.

Normally, all that could be heard on a day like this were the birds singing gaily in the trees, and, as the day wore on, perhaps the gentle drone of bumblebees drifting from flower to flower. There was a large patch of lavender at the crossroads leading into the village that always attracted the bees. Sometimes Miss Havers' skirt would brush the tiny lilac flowers as she sped past on her bicycle and a couple of bees would float lazily after her, just for a few yards, filling the air with their soft buzz. Then all she would be left with was the warm fragrance of the lavender and a childish sense of mischief.

Not that she actually had time for that sort of thing, obviously. Miss Havers prided herself on her busy schedule of community work and voluntary service.

Nevertheless, if she saw someone ahead, Miss Havers would cheerfully ring the bell on her handlebars – *br-rinnng!* – to let them know she was coming. More often than not she would be greeted with a correspondingly cheery wave. But, apart from the birds – and the bees – and her bell, there was nothing much to listen out for.

But this particular noise made Miss Havers apply the brakes and come to a dead stop. The old black Raleigh halted with barely a whisper. The bike was well oiled and in tiptop condition. It made no noise apart from the light swish of its tyres, or the click of its chain.

Miss Havers listened carefully. Even if her eyesight was failing, there was certainly nothing wrong with her ears. And there it was again: a low moan

– like a cow, possibly. A rather poorly cow, by the sound of it. The painful mooing reached a crescendo, until, with a final bellow that

sounded more mechanical than animal, it simply stopped.

It was very odd.

And, odder still, it seemed to have come from the direction of the village itself. Just around the next corner were the village green and the Post Office.

Miss Havers pedalled forward, coasting gently down the little slope that led into Marpling's main road.

Then she stopped the bike with a little screech of tyre rubber on tarmac.

Standing in the middle of the village green was a large blue. . . construction, of some sort. It was at least eight or nine feet tall, oblong in shape, and a 5

complete eyesore! Bizarrely, the thing appeared to have doors and even a row of little windows, as if it was some kind of hut. With a start, Miss Havers realised that there was an officious-looking sign across the top, which declared it to be a POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX.

A police box?

It hadn't been there yesterday afternoon.

Frowning, Miss Havers started towards it, but stopped once again as one of the police box's narrow doors opened and a young man emerged. He was dark and unshaven and had a distinctly untrustworthy look about him.

Miss Havers immediate reaction was one of alarm. This police box was obviously some kind of temporary holding facility for criminals. And here was one criminal in the full process of escape!

But then someone else followed the man out of the box. This time it was a girl, somewhat dark-skinned, very possibly from the Indian Subcontinent.

Before Miss Havers could properly assimilate all the details, a third person wandered out of the police box. Just how many people were squashed together in the infernal thing?

This last person was a different kettle of fish again. He had wild, unruly hair reaching almost to his shoulders. He wore a long black

frock coat, and beneath the stiff white collar of his shirt he sported a silken cravat and a dark-green waistcoat.

This was more than enough for Miss Havers. Even if they weren't actually criminals as such, then they were evidently gypsies. The swarthy youth, the foreign-looking girl, and finally this outlandishly dressed itinerant were instantly recognisable as a type. And gypsies were simply not welcome in a nice, law-abiding place like Marpling.

After muttering between them, the trio had set off towards the Post Office.

Eyes narrowed, Miss Havers pedalled on a direct course to intercept them.

'This has got to be Earth,' said Fitz as he stepped out of the TARDIS. 'Green grass! Blue sky! Trees!' He gave a theatrical sniff. 'And nowhere else smells like this!'

Anji, who had followed him out, wasn't taken in by the performance. 'I've learned recently never to judge by appearances – even smells.' She stopped and looked around the large square of neatly cut grass, spotted the POST

OFFICE GENERAL STORE on the far side of the green. 'But you're right, all the same. I'd even hazard a guess that this could be somewhere in the UK.'

'What's all this about guessing?' queried the last person to emerge from the police box. The Doctor glanced briefly about the place, shielding his sad blue eyes from the sunlight with one hand. 'This is unmistakably Earth, and definitely England.'

6

'There you are!' Fitz smiled victoriously at Anji. 'Congratulations, Doctor.'

You actually did it!

The Doctor had recently been making every effort to steer his capricious space-time machine towards Anji's home planet. But Anji knew that getting the right *place* was only half the battle for the TARDIS.

'But what time is it?' she asked pointedly.

‘About quarter to eight in the morning,’ replied the Doctor instantly, pointing at the large clock face on the tower of a stout Norman church just visible over the trees. He then set off towards the Post Office.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Anji countered, hurrying with Fitz to catch up. ‘I meant what *year* is it.’

‘Ah, well,’ continued the Doctor a little less confidently, ‘I think we’ve arrived a bit before your era, Anji. And before yours, too, Fitz.’

‘You mean we’ve gone too far back in time?’

‘I’m afraid so.’ The Doctor looked suddenly crestfallen, as though this was in fact the very last time and place he wanted to be.

Anji felt a familiar sense of unease developing. She found the Doctor acutely erratic – he was by turns lethargic and then energetic, bored one moment and full of fascination the next. He was annoyingly inconsistent, thrillingly unpredictable. Fitz claimed that the Doctor had once been seriously ill, or injured – certainly not the man he once was, allegedly. Much of the Doctor’s behaviour could easily be explained by a bump on the head, if not actual brain damage, but Anji sensed that he didn’t consider himself to be incomplete, or truly amnesiac. On the contrary, he acted more like a man who had been given the chance to start afresh, unencumbered, reborn. More than anything, he wanted to go forward, to explore, to travel through time and space – not bounce back to Earth on a piece of invisible elastic.

Because of all this Anji still felt wary of the Doctor, but she was never one to avoid a difficult issue. She took a deep breath and asked, once again, exactly what period they had arrived in.

‘I’d say early twentieth century,’ he mused. ‘Probably the 1930s. If pushed, I’d have to say 1933. Twenty-seventh of August, in fact.’

‘I suppose you can tell that by just sniffing the air, can you?’ Anji tried to sound amused by this blatant hogwash.

‘To a degree. The level of iron-oxidant pollutants in the atmosphere would indicate the period between the two World Wars, probably prior to the invention by Eugene Houdry in 1936 of a commercial process for the production of high-octane petrol by hydrogenation of lignite.’

‘All right. But August the twenty-seventh?’

‘Ah, well, I got that from the TARDIS yearometer.’

‘*Yearometer?*’ repeated Anji, her patience finally exhausted.

7

‘What’s wrong with that?’ asked Fitz.

The Doctor had a look of innocent puzzlement on his long face. ‘Yes, what is wrong with that?’

Anji just shook her head resignedly. ‘You’re having me on.’

‘Hold it,’ interrupted Fitz. ‘Old bat on a bike, heading this way.’

A middle-aged lady on a stout black bicycle wheeled to a halt in front of them, effectively barring their way to the Post Office. She was dressed in a neat jacket, long tweedy skirt and sensible shoes. There was a straw hat on her head and a straw basket on the front of her bicycle’s handlebars.

For some reason the Doctor was grinning at her, but the look she responded with was by no means jovial. ‘What do you think you’re doing here?’ she demanded shrilly.

The Doctor glanced at Anji and Fitz. ‘Who? Us?’

‘You can all jolly well get back inside that “police box” and wait for a constable to come and collect you,’ she added.

‘Now wait a minute,’ said Anji firmly. ‘Just who do you think we are?’

The lady reeled back as if insulted. ‘How dare you?’

The TARDIS crew looked at one another again, perplexed. The Doctor licked his lips. ‘I think we’ve got off on the wrong foot, Miss. . . ?’

‘Havers.’

‘Miss Havers. Allow me to introduce –’

‘We don’t want *your sort* in Marpling,’ Miss Havers said. ‘Do I make myself clear?’

‘Our sort?’ echoed Anji.

‘Gypsies!’

Fitz laughed. 'We're not gypsies! We're. . . ' And then he hesitated, looking to the Doctor for support.

'Travellers?' ventured the Doctor.

'Of no fixed abode!' Miss Havers pointed out.

'Oh, we have an abode,' said Anji. 'Fixing it seems to be a bit of a problem, though.'

'Don't presume to get clever with me, young lady,' snapped Miss Havers.

Her beady little eyes flashed beneath the brim of her hat. 'Gypsies, travellers

– call yourselves what you will. The fact remains we don't want you here in Marpling. Go on, clear off! Move on, or whatever it is your type do.'

'We?' queried the Doctor. He looked about, as if expecting a mob of angry old spinsters on bicycles to rally round their leader. But there were only the four of them standing outside the Post Office.

'I speak for the whole village,' Miss Havers assured him confidently.

8

'No, you don't,' said a voice behind them. A man had walked out of the Post Office, smiling and with his hands in his pockets, but nevertheless clearly prepared to argue the point.

He was tall, with raven-black hair swept back from an intelligent brow and deeply set, glittering eyes. He wore an old brown hacking jacket over a red waistcoat. His shirt collar was loose, and without a tie.

Miss Havers was glaring at the newcomer with undisguised contempt.

'Hello,' the man said, offering his hand towards the Doctor. 'Hilary Pink. Is this old monument harassing you?'

'We've had better welcomes,' the Doctor said smiling warily, shaking his hand. Hilary Pink extended the same courtesy to Fitz and Anji, lingering slightly on the latter.

'Delighted to meet you, Miss. . . ?'

‘Kapoor. Anji Kapoor – and this is the Doctor and Fitz Kreiner.’ Miss Havers appeared ready to collapse under this onslaught of foreign-sounding names.

‘Well, I never!’

‘No,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘I don’t suppose you have. Good day, Miss Havers.’

Fuming, and with a final venomous look at Hilary Pink, the old lady mounted her bike and pedalled off.

‘Stupid old bag,’ exclaimed Fitz.

‘She’s not typical of this place, thank goodness,’ Hilary Pink assured them.

‘Marpling’s a bit set in its ways, but old dragons like that are a dying breed.’

‘What we need is plenty of knights in shining armour,’ said Anji. ‘Thanks for stepping in, Mr Pink. Any more of that rubbish and I think Fitz here would have biffed her one. Or I would.’

Hilary Pink looked curiously at Anji for a second, a smile on his lips. ‘Call me Hilary – everyone else does. I’m not much of one for formalities.’

‘Right,’ said Anji brightly. ‘Hilary it is!’

‘Staying here long?’ Hilary asked.

‘We don’t know yet,’ replied the Doctor. ‘Should we?’

‘Up to you. But if you’re looking for a place to stay, I’d recommend giving the pub a miss.’

‘Pub?’ Fitz looked disappointed.

‘Like I said, Marpling’s a bit set in its ways. By the time you reach the White Lion, Miss Havers’s poison tongue will have done its deadly work and you’ll have a mob of angry villagers ready to chase you out as soon as look at you.

But if you *are* looking for somewhere to stay, I can offer you room at my place.’

‘Well, we wouldn’t want to intrude. . . ’ said the Doctor.

‘Not at all. I can promise you clean beds to sleep in. Decent food. Good conversation. Wine.’ Hilary’s deep brown eyes disappeared into a wreath of crinkles. ‘What d’you say?’

9

‘The wine swings it for me,’ said Fitz. ‘I don’t know about you two, but I’m up for it.’

‘Yes,’ agreed the Doctor. ‘We can take a day off from saving the universe, I suppose.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ laughed Hilary. ‘Come on – it’s this way. About a fifteen-minute walk.’

Adjacent to the village green was a small copse of trees by the roadside verge.

In the gloom of the foliage beneath the trees, a pair of eyes tracked the TARDIS

crew as they sauntered off with Hilary Pink. The eyes watched carefully as the newcomers disappeared from view.

The figure crouched down lower in the hushes and shifted position slightly.

It would have been very difficult to spot him from the road, even if an observer had known he was there. The shadows and the vegetation seemed to flow over his head and shoulders like a kind of perfect camouflage.

The watcher turned his attention back to the village green, and the old blue police box that now stood at its centre. To all intents and purposes, the box looked as if it had always been there.

But the watcher knew that it hadn’t.

He had seen it materialise out of thin air.

10

Chapter Three

Miss Havers cycled all the way to the church without stopping. She

was furious.

A sense of relief flooded through her when she turned the corner and saw St Cuthbert's on its little hill. She pedalled up the gentle slope towards the lich gate rather than get off the Raleigh and push it, as was her normal custom.

She felt *that* irritated.

'Miss Havers!' called the Reverend Ernest Fordyke as she practically skidded to a halt before the church steps. 'Whatever is the matter?'

He was holding the church door open, genuine concern on his lined face. He had greying hair, wispy and once curly, receding from a prominent forehead.

He was always gentle and kind, just as a vicar should be. Miss Havers felt immediately safe in his company.

'Oh, Vicar!' she gasped. 'Thank goodness you're here.'

'Where else might I be?' He smiled and held out a hand to steady her as she dismounted. 'I was rather wondering where *you* had got to, to be quite honest. I seem to recall that you offered to help me sort out the hymn books, and it's not like you to be late.'

'Oh, Vicar, I'm all of a fluster. That Pink person, he's so rude –'

'Wait a moment. Why don't you park your conveyance up there and come inside? Then you can tell me all about it.'

He always called it that – her *conveyance*. She had been amused by it once and ever since he had delighted in making her smile. He took the old Raleigh from her with a small grunt of effort – it was a heavy bicycle – and rested it on its stand in the porch. No one else was ever allowed to leave a bicycle in the church porch.

She followed him into the church, which was blessedly cool. And blessedly empty.

'I take it you're referring to our Mr Hilary Pink,' said the clergyman as they walked down the aisle towards the altar. 'Scourge of Marpling.'

'Please don't joke about it,' pleaded Miss Havers. 'I've had quite enough of that insufferable man. He had the nerve to flatly contradict me in front of. . .'

Oh, it's all so complicated!'

'Tell me all about it.'

11

Miss Havers recounted her meeting with the gypsies on the village green, and how she had done her duty to the community by urging them to move on. She treated Hilary Pink's involvement with the utmost scorn. 'Trust him to side with them,' she finished. 'He's nothing but trouble – always has been, right back to the Great War. You didn't know him then, Vicar – you weren't here – but your predecessor held him in very low esteem, I must say.'

'I'm sure,' replied Fordyke, who seemed to remember that his predecessor at St Cuthbert's held practically everybody in low esteem. But Hilary Pink was a notorious black sheep in these parts.

'He insulted me,' Miss Havers declared. 'Insulted!'

'Perhaps it is impossible to expect behaviour of your high standards from such a man,' said Fordyke. 'I'm sure he meant no harm personally – at least, no more than he might direct at any other member of the community. It's true he's not well liked in Marpling. That's bound to make him feel a little resentful, I would imagine.'

'You're right, of course,' admitted Miss Havers reluctantly. Her eyes narrowed. 'If I didn't know better, Vicar, I'd say you were practising next Sunday's sermon on me.'

'Perhaps I am.' He smiled. 'But I can't think of a better person to practise on.'

'Quite,' replied Miss Havers. 'I think.'

'My recommendation is that you put the whole affair out of your mind, Miss Havers. Quite honestly, Hilary Pink isn't worth your time and effort. And as for these gypsies – well, they are wanderers by definition. I'm sure it won't be long before they wander off again, if they haven't already done so.'

Miss Havers shivered at the memory. 'I don't know, Vicar. They looked a peculiar bunch, even for gypsies. There was something about them. Something. . . '

'Yes?'

‘Something *unearthly*. I didn’t like them at all. Not a very Christian view-point, I suppose – but there we are.’ Miss Havers clapped her hands together to signal the end of the subject as far as she was concerned. ‘Now then, Mr Fordyke. I am sure I shall feel quite recovered very soon. In a moment you can make us both a pot of tea, and I can start on the hymn books. But first, you must tell me how the restoration work is progressing!’

‘Slowly, I’m afraid,’ said Fordyke with heartfelt concern and an automatic glance upward at the ceiling. A large part of the ceiling above the altar steps was obscured by a mass of wooden scaffolding and temporary planks. St Cuthbert’s Roof Committee, of which Miss Havers was of course the secretary, had raised enough money to have the failing timbers replaced and the roof releaded. This was an excellent and worthy project, but Fordyke wished that 12

it hadn’t necessitated the number of ladders and planks of wood now dotted around the vestry for him to stumble over every morning.

‘I’m due to see Mr Carlton later this morning,’ he told Miss Havers. ‘I’m hoping to find out when he might be finished. . . ’

Charles Rigby normally woke up early, refreshed and alert, after a good night’s sleep. This morning, however, he overslept. He had suffered a succession of nightmares during a restless and sweaty night and finally woke up feeling exhausted. His alarm clock lay forgotten on the carpet at his bedside, where he had knocked it.

He staggered through his usual morning routine in a daze. While he shaved, one particular bad dream kept coming back to him: that he was trapped in a darkened room full of angry wasps. He wasn’t usually susceptible to extremes of imagination and the notion irritated him. He knew exactly what had put the thought in his head before going to bed last night – the business with Liam Jarrow and the shed. Rigby resolved to sort the matter out as soon as he had finished breakfast. There was still plenty of time before he opened up for morning surgery.

When he finally reached the kitchen, he didn’t even feel like making breakfast, much less eating it. He settled for a cup of coffee, which he ended up barely sipping. From where he sat at the kitchen table, he could see the shed at the bottom of his garden. His gaze remained fixed on it for several minutes, unblinking.

Mentally he shook himself. Get a grip, old man! He was feeling a little

nauseous and rather warm, but after a bad night like that it was probably only to be expected. It was certainly no use just sitting here and moping. Rigby stood up and decided to tackle the problem there and then. The first thing to do would be to assess the situation, which meant going out and actually taking a look at the shed. There was a pane of glass set in the side nearer to the house, and he would be able to take a peek inside quite safely.

It was another warm and sunny morning, promising a long hot day. Rigby opened the kitchen windows wide to let some air into the house. He was beginning to feel better already.

As he opened the back door to the garden, his thoughts turned to the strange object he had wanted to show Liam Jarrow the previous evening.

He'd originally found it sticking out of his vegetable patch, right between two rows of promising King Edwards. Its smooth black shape had caught his eye immediately and sent a tingle of apprehension right through him. Silly really, he reflected. He had never been given to flights of fancy, but this thing seemed to unsettle him. He'd examined it briefly and then, not wanting to have it in the house, put it in a shoebox and stored it in the shed. He'd had a 13

half-formed idea even then to show it to Liam, in the hope of distracting him from thoughts of war.

Well, he'd certainly distracted him all right! The boy had positively fled after that business with the wasps' nest. Rigby didn't really blame him. Wasps were unpleasant blighters.

As he approached the shed, he could hear the humming quite clearly. Remarkably, it was a number of seconds before he connected it with the wasps.

A nervous chill passed through him as he realised it was really the noise of the wasps inside the shed. They were buzzing like mad things! They must have been pretty shaken up, Rigby thought, to be still buzzing like that. Surely even a disturbed nest of the wretched things would have quietened down overnight.

He noticed that a couple of the blighters were crawling around the edge of the door and roof, presumably having found some tiny exit or another. The majority of them must still be inside, though.

He peered into the window, cupping his hands around his face to cut

down on the reflection.

He couldn't see much. It was pretty dark in there.

He withdrew slightly, refocusing on the glass itself. The darkness inside was *moving*. With a shock he realised that the interior of the window was covered in wasps. A thick carpet of them, their bodies pressed up so close to one another that they appeared to be one great mass. He shuddered at the thought that he had pressed his face right up against the other side of the glass.

The buzzing was starting to get to him now, and the incessant movement behind the glass was disgusting. For a moment Rigby stood there, hands bunched into fists on his hips, wondering exactly what he should do next.

He physically jumped when the glass cracked.

A single line of fracture stretched from top to bottom, but the glass held.

The activity of the wasps grew suddenly more frenzied, as if they could sense a way out of their prison. Rigby had the distinct impression that they were massing against the broken pane as if deliberately trying to force it. But that was ridiculous.

All at once the glass cracked again, in several places, jagged splinters tumbling out of the old wooden frame. Rigby took a few startled steps back as the wasps poured out, filling the air with a maddened buzz. Some of them drifted towards him and he had to bat them away with his hand. All the while he was backing away towards his house.

More wasps began to fly towards him. They were all around him now, too many to wave away. They started to follow him down the garden as he turned and made for the house.

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By the time he reached the back door Rigby was running. He could hear the wasps behind him, the air filled with their aggressive whirr. They must have been enraged by their captivity during the night, and now they were after revenge.

Rigby slammed the back door shut, but one or two of the insects managed to get inside. He lashed out at the nearer one and flicked it across the kitchen.

Then he looked around for something to swat the little pests with – a rolled-up newspaper would be ideal. He'd take some satisfaction in squashing them flat!

Then he remembered the windows.

He'd opened them wide just before. . .

The wasps poured through the open windows, settling on the wood and the sink, floating around the kitchen. In seconds there were hundreds of them –

the entire swarm must be coming in!

Rigby darted for the door that led into the next room, but he never made it.

The wasps surrounded him, settling on his face and hands. He yelled and brushed them away, felt the inevitable stings on his hands and his fingers.

More were flying around his head, crawling in his hair and on his neck. He stumbled over a kitchen chair and fell to his knees. The air was full of insects, his ears filled with their agitated noise.

They were after him. It was deliberate. Rigby knew it.

Now he could feel them all over him! He kept his eyes shut, but he knew that they must be covering his skin as they had covered the shed window. He could feel hundreds of them, their tiny legs tickling on his lips and around his nostrils.

Eventually, he couldn't help it: the compunction was too great to ignore. He knew he shouldn't do it, but he couldn't stop it. It wasn't so much a decision as a reflex.

He opened his mouth and screamed for help.

15

Chapter Four

The tractor rumbled down the lane, its driver raising a hand in salutation as he passed the little group of people walking. It had no driver's cab, and the farmer sat on a wide metal seat open to the elements. On a gloriously sunny day like this, and given his rather sedate progress, his situation looked rather enviable.

The Doctor sighed wistfully as the tractor motored past. ‘All those years here, and I never got to drive one of those,’ he said, stopping to lean against a gate.

Fitz watched him carefully.

His old friend seemed distracted – almost

broody. Perhaps it was something to do with coming back to this particular planet. For the Doctor it was a case of almost literally coming back down to Earth. ‘I didn’t think you had any regrets,’ ventured Fitz lightly.

But the Doctor’s eyes had taken on that sorrowful look. ‘I was just trying to recall what I was doing in 1933.’

Fitz sympathised. His own memories seemed a little cloudy these days. Certainly regarding the recent past – but the Doctor was talking about things that had happened to him nearly seventy years ago. No wonder he was looking so troubled. The Doctor had accumulated more memories in his lifetime than either of his two companions combined. The tiny lines around his eyes and mouth were the only outward signs of his great age, however.

‘It was such a long time ago,’ confessed the Doctor with a brief, embarrassed smile. ‘And I did so many things. . .’

‘Except drive a tractor,’ noted Fitz.

The Doctor laughed.

Fitz said, ‘Does it bother you, coming back here so soon?’

‘I’m trying to get Anji back home.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

The Doctor shrugged. ‘There’s a whole universe out there,’ he said quietly, his eyes focusing on something Fitz couldn’t see. ‘We can go to any planet in any galaxy at any time in history.’

‘For what it’s worth,’ said Fitz after an awkward pause, ‘I think Anji might actually want to stay on a bit longer.’

The Doctor turned his head to look at Anji, who was walking slowly up the lane behind them, chatting amiably to Hilary Pink. ‘She seems to be enjoying 17

herself now.'

'Yeah,' agreed Fitz. 'Doesn't she?'

They waited for Anji and Hilary to catch up, Hilary giving them both a hearty smile as they approached.

They were ambling down what Anji Kapoor considered to be a perfect country lane – narrow, with overgrown roadside hedges full of tall, fragrant grass and wild flowers. The sun was shining, it was getting nicely warm and all she could hear were the birds in the trees and the lazy hum of bumblebees as they floated between the foxgloves.

She had found Hilary to be easy-going and amusing; what was more, he didn't ask her a load of difficult questions. Anji was beginning to feel that walking around this sleepy English village in the 1930s was going to be fun, almost a holiday. Rather like visiting a comfy old BBC period drama like *All Creatures Great and Small*.

'So, what exactly are you doing in Marpling, Doctor?' asked Hilary.

'Passing through, I think,' the Doctor was saying in reply to Hilary. He had a marvellous talent for being so precisely vague at times. 'I'm not really sure.'

Hilary nodded and smiled, perhaps deliberately not pressing the point. He was quite good-looking, Anji decided, in a rather decadent kind of way. There was a hint – nothing more – of wildness about him, with those twinkling eyes and sudden, wolfish smile.

'Flippin' insects,' muttered Fitz, swatting at a fly or something as it crossed his path. 'This really is the back of beyond, isn't it?'

Anji laughed at him. 'City boy, eh?'

'You can't talk.' Fitz shot an accusing glare at her. 'Don't tell me you like all this. The air so fresh you can smell the cowpats.'

'I think it's lovely. It's just like a holiday.'

'There aren't any holidays with the Doctor.'

'But you've got to admit this is something of a change of pace for us, at least.'

'For the moment.'

‘Fitz, you’re so cynical!’

‘Don’t mistake experience for cynicism. I’ve been with the Doctor for a lot longer than you, remember. Danger and excitement are our constant companions.’

‘Yeah, yeah. . . ’ Anji was about to say more when she spotted the Doctor and Hilary slowing to a halt, right by a pair of rather handsome gateposts.

‘Hold on – looks like we’ve arrived.’

‘At long last,’ said Fitz.

18

‘Here we are, then,’ Hilary was saying, holding out a hand to show them the way. ‘My little home.’

‘Little?’ Anji repeated doubtfully as she caught up.

It was practically a manor. A large gravelled driveway led up to a solid portico of aged, sand-coloured stone with an enormous front door. The house itself was built from the same sandy masonry, three storeys high and twice as wide. There were windows everywhere.

‘Nice gaff you’ve got yourself here,’ commented Fitz.

The Doctor was already crunching his way across the drive. There was a big car parked in front of the portico, open-topped, low and wide and a lustrous dark green. A huge set of polished chrome headlamps crowned the front of a long gleaming bonnet.

‘One of the four-and-a-half-litre Bentleys,’ said the Doctor appreciatively

‘Brand-new. Very nice.’

‘You know about motorcars, Doctor?’ asked Hilary.

‘I love travel machines of any kind,’ admitted the Doctor, running his hand over the glittering paintwork. ‘This one’s a real beauty. Is she yours?’

‘My pride and joy! We can take her for a spin after, if you like.’

The Doctor was practically jumping. ‘That would be marvellous! Does

it have the Amherst-Villiers supercharger?’

‘Boys with toys,’ said Anji, shaking her head. Fitz’s eyes were also like saucers as he prowled around the vintage car. Then, with a slight jolt, she realised that she had automatically thought of it as a *vintage* car – but it wasn’t.

For Hilary, it was state-of-the-art.

‘Damned waste of money if you ask me!’ growled a voice from the porch.

The front door of the manor house was hidden in shadow, and none of them had noticed another man emerging from inside as they admired the vehicle.

As he stepped out into the sunlight, the man took them all in with a crisp, narrow-eyed glare that almost made Anji gulp.

‘Morning, Squire,’ hollered Hilary.

‘Never mind that,’ snapped the man. ‘Who are these people?’

He was tall, but older and broader than Hilary. His hair was iron-grey and swept back from a weathered complexion. He wore a checked sports jacket over a mustard-coloured waistcoat that was perhaps a little too taut around his middle.

‘These are friends of mine,’ said Hilary, gesturing to the TARDIS crew ‘Allow me to introduce the Doctor, Fitz Kreiner and Miss Anji Kap– Sorry, what was it?’

‘Kapoor.’

The elder gent strode down the steps from the porch and smiled at Anji.

‘My dear, I do beg your pardon. Didn’t see you there. Forgive Hilary his 19

beastly lack of manners, won’t you? Leaving you till last like that. I sometimes wonder what I’m going to do with him – and then I remember: I gave up on him entirely, a long time ago.’

‘And you are?’

‘George Pink,’ said the man. ‘Hilary’s elder brother.’

‘Everyone calls him Squire Pink,’ said Hilary.

They all shook hands, and Anji was pleased to note that ‘Squire’ Pink gave Fitz a somewhat disdainful smile and the Doctor a frankly quizzical look.

‘Doctor, eh?’ he repeated with interest. ‘After work? We could do with a doctor in Marpling – ever since Doctor Gillespie eloped with that girl from the dairy. Don’t miss the dairy girl much, but what are we to do without the local quack, eh?’

‘I’m not that sort of doctor,’ came the reply. ‘But we were just admiring your splendid house.’

‘It’s actually a grange,’ said Squire Pink. ‘Been here for ever.’

‘Is it all Bath stone?’

‘Of course – nearly everything is around here. Bath’s only fifty miles away.’

‘Really? I had no idea we were so close.’

‘Do you know Bath, Doctor?’

‘Not really – but some time ago I stayed at Longleat with the Marquis of Bath.’

‘Really!’ Squire Pink seemed genuinely impressed. ‘What are we all doing talking out here on the drive? Come inside, everyone.’

Anji and Fitz looked at each other. How was it the Doctor always seemed to know the right names to drop?

The house was just as splendid inside: the large hallway was cool and airy, giving on to an expansive – but not ostentatious – staircase. Oil paintings were mounted against the dark wood-panelled walls, mostly landscapes but there was one portrait of a rather severe-looking gent in full dress uniform. He had bright-as-button eyes and an imposing white handlebar moustache. Anji took him to be a Pink ancestor – possibly even George and Hilary’s father.

George Pink took them right through to the back of the house, which overlooked an extensive and beautifully tended garden. The room he showed them to was partly a study – there were many books lining a long shelf along one wall – and partly a music room, perhaps: in one

corner stood a baby grand piano with the lid up. The sunlight caught a thin sheen of dust across the walnut top.

‘I hope you don’t mind us intruding like this,’ the Doctor said.

‘Don’t mention it,’ said Squire Pink in his gravelly voice. ‘I’m rather used to my little brother’s unorthodox acquaintances now.’ He sounded jovial enough 20

at the moment, but Anji didn’t doubt that Squire Pink would be quite frightening when roused. And the effect he seemed to have on Hilary – his little brother! – was marked.

‘I’m something of a black sheep in my family,’ explained Hilary. He was helping himself to a drink from a decanter on the sideboard. With a shock Anji realised he was pouring himself a Scotch. Anyone?’ he asked, waving the crystal decanter slightly.

‘Bit early for us,’ said the Doctor.

Fitz closed his mouth as though he had been ready to accept.

‘It’s never too early for Hilary, is it?’ said Squire Pink pointedly.

‘He thinks I’m a drunk,’ Hilary said, raising his glass towards his brother in mock toast.

‘I *know* you’re a drunk.’

‘He likes to lord it over me as well as the rest of the village,’ continued Hilary unabashed. ‘But it doesn’t work.’

Now Anji recognised the glint in Hilary Pink’s eye – alcohol. And yet he didn’t seem unpleasant or even inebriated. Perhaps he just needed his booze to get through the day, as many of her peers in London had in 2001. He had caught her reappraisal of him and smiled, winking. Anji couldn’t help smiling back.

‘I’ll get the rest of us a pot of tea,’ suggested Squire Pink.

‘Where’s Maria?’ asked Hilary, slumping into an armchair. ‘Your servant girl?’

‘She’s not a servant,’ said Squire Pink shortly. ‘And I’ve given her leave to return to Salisbury for a fortnight. Poor girl’s mother is very ill.’

‘Oh, you’re all heart.’

‘Hilary doesn’t believe in the class system,’ explained the Squire. The Doctor, Fitz and Anji all looked back at him blankly. ‘Oh, I see. Of course – you’re all bolshies, too, I take it. Very well. Shan’t talk about it.’

‘I’m not a Bolshevik, you old fool,’ cried Hilary from the depths of his armchair. ‘I’m not a Marxist or a liberal or anything. I’m totally nonpolitical.’

‘Have it your own way. I’m having a cup of tea. Anyone?’

They all murmured that they’d like a cup of tea. Anji felt a bit sorry for Hilary, drinking on his own. There was something slightly pathetic about it.

‘There have been Pinks in Marpling since 1647,’ said Hilary morosely after his brother had left the room. ‘Peripheral aristocracy, the lot of them. I’m the first to break with tradition – no job, no prospects, no bother.’

‘But a very nice Bentley,’ Fitz pointed out.

Hilary raised his glass and smiled. ‘But a very nice Bentley.’

The Doctor, Anji suddenly realised, had drifted off to the far side of the room, apparently taking no interest in the conversation at all. He had been 21

inspecting the well-stocked bookshelf on the far wall; his head tilted at an angle to read the spines. ‘Your reading matter is quite varied,’ he commented.

‘My own books are mixed up with George’s, I’m afraid. His are the great works, the classics. Mine are the penny dreadfuls.’

‘I see. Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* next to Burroughs’ *Warlord of Mars*.

Which is which?’

Hilary laughed, genuinely and warmly.

‘I met Edgar Rice Burroughs once,’ said the Doctor. ‘Had a nice chat about Mars. I think he was only half-listening, though.’

Hilary sat up, immediately interested. ‘You’ve met him? Have you

ever read *Tarzan of the Apes*?’

The Doctor was still examining the books. ‘Met him, too,’ he muttered, apparently distracted.

‘Met him. . . ?’

Further discussion was prevented when Squire Pink returned with a large silver tray full of china cups and saucers, a tall silver teapot and a bowl of sugar. Anji thought he couldn’t be all that bad if he was prepared – and able

– to rustle up a cuppa at the drop of a hat.

‘Gosh, George,’ said Hilary. ‘You’ll be digging over the garden next and cleaning out the gutters.’

‘Don’t be facetious. Finish that damn drink and go about your business for the day.’ Squire Pink put the tray down on a table and glowered at his brother.

‘I must say your new friends seem far better behaved than you. Why don’t you push off and leave them here with me?’

‘Shall I be mother?’ asked Fitz, picking up the teapot, but everyone ignored him.

‘I’ve got to go into the village later,’ said Squire Pink. Anji wasn’t sure whether he was talking to his brother or addressing the room in general.

‘Some business with Tom Carlton and the church roof needs settling, and I’ve arranged to meet him. You’re welcome to stay here if you can stand Hilary’s company any longer.’

‘We’ll be fine, I’m sure,’ said Anji, with a little smile at Hilary.

‘Don’t let him drag you down, Miss Kapoor,’ warned the Squire. ‘Everyone should have standards.’

Anji, unsure how to respond to this, just smiled sweetly and took the cup and saucer proffered by Fitz. As he passed it to her his hand wobbled and hot tea sloshed over the lip of the cup on to Anji’s thumb. ‘Ow! Fitz!’

‘Sorry,’ he said, but he was looking the other way. Out of the window.

‘Thought I saw something.’

Anji sucked her thumb. ‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Something moving in the garden. Right at the bottom –
I 22

thought it was a person.’

‘Shouldn’t be anyone out there,’ said Squire Pink, peering through the French windows. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Well – yes, look! There they are again!’ Fitz was pointing to a large rhododendron bush at the bottom of the garden, but all Anji could see was dense foliage. ‘There’s someone there, I tell you!’

‘It might be an animal,’ suggested Anji. ‘A cat, or even a fox, perhaps.’

Fitz shook his head. ‘No, I’m sure it was a person. A man.’

‘We’ll soon see about that,’ declared the Squire, heading for the doors. He strode out into the garden and marched across the lawn. When he reached the bushes, he gave them a good shake and peered into the gloom behind the leaves. Then he turned around and shook his head, shrugging.

‘You’re imagining things,’ said Anji.

‘No I’m not,’ insisted Fitz. ‘There was someone there. Watching us. I’m sure of it.’

‘Then where’ve they gone?’

‘I don’t know. I’m just telling you what I saw!’

‘You’re getting jumpy in your old age, that’s your problem.’ Anji tried to laugh it off, but it was unlike Fitz to be so sincere.

He was actually getting quite angry: ‘I know what I saw!’

They were all distracted by a sudden noise coming from the piano. The Doctor had meandered past it and was running his fingers along the keys.

‘Fitz is right,’ the Doctor said without looking up.

‘What?’

'There was someone in the garden watching us,' the Doctor went on. 'Probably the same someone who was watching us in the village when we first arrived. And followed us all the way here.'

'What?' Anji said again, incredulous.

'I knew it!' Fitz hissed with satisfaction.

Anji was now feeling quite alarmed. 'Someone *followed* us? Who?'

'And if you were aware of them all along,' said Hilary Pink, crossly, 'why the devil didn't you say something?'

Everyone was staring at the Doctor, but his face was a picture of innocence, as if he couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. His fingers picked out a few more bars of a tune on the piano before he said, 'Well, whoever it was obviously didn't want to be noticed. They were very well hidden. Who it was or why they were watching us I don't know. But I'm sure that, in the fullness of time, they will make themselves known to us.'

Only then did Anji vaguely recognise the tune the Doctor had played: 'Para-noid' by Black Sabbath.

Suddenly it didn't feel much like a holiday any more.

23

Chapter Five

Jode hit the road at a run and kept on going. He had to take a chance on being seen in the open. Ahead was another hedgerow, and beyond that a sizable thicket in which he could lose himself.

His boots struck the tarmac with very little noise. Everything Jode wore was designed to reduce the sound he made as he moved, or help camouflage him. It had worked beautifully in the village itself, and then on the country lanes as he followed the trio from the police box. But it wasn't foolproof, and some fool had spotted him from the window at the back of the big house.

He'd only just made it over the wall in time, cracking his shins badly as he scrambled over the coping. He'd really had to put all his trust in his camouflage at that moment. Then he had simply sprinted for the better cover on the far side of the road. Now he would be practically invisible.

He piled through the foliage, up a steep bank covered in thick ferns. Then into the trees. There he took a moment to catch his breath and pull the balaclava off his head so that he could wipe away the sweat on his face. He had strong, broad features with a nose that had once been broken in a fight; Jode had refused any attempt to have it straightened because he considered personal appearances to be irrelevant.

For a few more seconds he gulped in the air – so fresh and incredibly clean it made him feel light-headed – and consulted the compass on his left wrist. The little display showed a rapid series of luminous digits. The transduction site wasn't far from here, and this would point him in exactly the right direction.

He donned the balaclava and set off into the woods at a run. It was time to report back to the others.

'It's time I was off,' said Tom Carlton, wiping his lips on a napkin.

Liam Jarrow watched him put the napkin back down on the table, a smear of butter and marmalade on the otherwise clean white linen. His stomach heaved. It wasn't the fact that his stepfather had used the napkin so much as what it represented that disgusted him. He knew Carlton *hated* marmalade –

Liam could see him practically choking on every piece of thick, chewy shred –

but he still ate it every morning on his toast at breakfast. And all because he wanted to impress Liam's mother.

25

It was a ritual. Carlton would eat up his toast and marmalade, smack his lips and wipe the residue on a napkin. He'd down the last of his coffee – black, no sugar, American-style – and then he would say, 'It's time I was off.'

'You can say that again,' murmured Liam.

'Liam!' his mother chided half-heartedly.

'It's OK, honey,' said Carlton. 'Let it drop.'

The American accent cut through Liam like a knife. He glowered at Carlton and Carlton just looked straight through him. Liam knew it

hurt his mother to despise her new husband so much, but Liam couldn't – really couldn't – help it. He hated the way Carlton looked at his mother, hated the way his black hair was slicked down with oil, and hated the way he tied the knot in his tie.

Carlton was straightening that tie knot now, in the mirror in the hall. Liam pictured him easily enough even though he sat with his back to him, hunched over his own uneaten breakfast.

'Not having anything, darling?' sighed his mother.

Liam pushed his plate away. 'Not hungry. Something's putting me off my food.'

'Probably Charles Rigby,' he heard Carlton say.

'Mr Rigby?' echoed his mother. 'Liam, have you been to see him again?'

'Sure he did.' There was a smirk in Carlton's voice now, and Liam's heart sank. 'That's why I saw him coming along Mason Lane last night. Where else could he have gotten to?'

'Oh, Liam,' said his mother tersely. 'How many times do I have to tell you?'

Stop going round there. It's not good for you.'

'Mr Rigby's all right,' said Liam. 'He's kind to me.'

'Rubbish. He fills up your head with nonsense about joining the army, I know he does.' Gwen Carlton started stacking dirty plates noisily by the kitchen sink. 'You should keep away from him, I've told you.'

'He *doesn't*. As a matter of fact, he tries to tell me *not* to join up. But it's my decision.'

'Tom, tell him,' ordered Gwen in exasperation.

'No use my saying anything, honey,' replied her husband as he shrugged himself into his garishly checked jacket. 'You know he doesn't listen to a word I say.'

'If being a soldier was good enough for my *father* –' Liam emphasised the last word for Carlton's benefit – 'then it's more than good enough for me.'

‘Your father *had* to join up,’ Gwen responded, forcing herself to say it gently.

‘He was conscripted. There was a war on. Everyone had to go.’

‘*He* didn’t,’ said Liam, nodding with the back of his head at Carlton.

‘Hey, I played my part!’

26

Will you two please stop bickering?’ Gwen threw the dishcloth down on the draining board with a wet thud. ‘This is getting us nowhere. Liam, you can forget all about becoming a soldier. There’s no future in it any more, even if it was a decent profession. You can take up a post in Tom’s firm when you’re old enough, isn’t that right, Tom?’

‘Not my decision, honey.’

Gwen looked crossly back at her son. ‘And you can stop seeing Mr Rigby.

I don’t care what he says. I don’t like you seeing him. You agree, don’t you, Tom?’

Carlton nodded. ‘Sure. And as I’ll be seeing Rigby pretty soon, I’ll tell him myself if you like.’

‘Really?’

‘Sure. I told you already – I’ve a dental appointment for this morning, on my way in to work. I’ll have a word with him then.’

‘Of course. I’d completely forgotten, silly me.’ Although evidently relieved, a thought seemed to strike Gwen. ‘You won’t be rude to him, will you, dear?’

Carlton laughed. ‘Only an idiot is rude to his dentist!’

‘That’s that sorted, then,’ muttered Liam. He listened to his mother kissing Carlton goodbye, and relaxed only when he heard the front door shut behind him.

His mother came back into the kitchen, her lips pressed into a thin line. ‘I don’t know, Liam. You used to be such a nice boy. What’s the matter with you? Can’t you even pretend to like Tom?’

Liam glared at the dirty napkin. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I can’t.’

Her name was Kala.

For this mission, at least.

She was taller than average, with fine-boned features, a wide mouth and steady green eyes. Her dark-red hair was cut in a no-nonsense style: straight across her eyebrows and straight across at the nape of her neck.

Kala didn’t like fuss or delay, which was just one of the reasons why she was feeling crabby at the moment.

She squatted in the long grass, deep in the woods, not too far from the transduction point. It was uncomfortable – crouching down with the foliage and the insects, the smell of the earth sharp in her nostrils – but it was a good place to hide. The one-piece SNS suit she wore, zipped diagonally across her chest from the left hip to her right collarbone, rendered her practically invisible to any casual glance. This far into the trees she would be difficult to detect even if someone knew what to look for – and there was no one around here capable of that.

So, she was satisfied as far as their security was concerned.

27

What irked her, besides the general discomfort, was the delay in any progress since they had arrived. The mission, such as it was, depended upon a speedy conclusion. Now everything appeared to have simply ground to a halt.

Kala looked up as Jode stepped into the clearing. ‘You took your time,’ she snapped.

‘Interesting choice of words,’ he said, pulling off his balaclava. His dark skin gleamed with perspiration. ‘How’re we doing?’

Kala shook her head. ‘Still can’t get an accurate fix. Fatboy’s been recalibrating the scanner every five minutes and trying again, but no luck so far.’

‘It’s got to be somewhere in the vicinity,’ said Fatboy. He was sitting bent over the scanner, its little green display reflecting off his young, thin face. He had big eyes and long lashes and a habit of chewing his

bottom lip when he was concentrating. Kala was trying not to like him, but it was difficult.

‘How about you?’ she asked Jode.

Jode sat down heavily on a fallen tree trunk and peeled off his gloves. ‘Well, no sign of the thing we’re looking for. . . ’

‘But?’

‘But I did come across something rather interesting. I was at the second-stage OP in the village when I saw it. A large blue box materialised out of thin air, right in front of my eyes.’

Kala frowned. ‘Large blue box? What kind of large blue box?’

‘Dunno. Looked funny – kind of old-fashioned. It had a sign on it which said POLICE BOX.’

‘*Police?*’ Kala sounded perplexed. ‘What the hell’s going on?’

‘I checked my own scanner,’ Jode continued, holding up his arm and rattling the large chronometer on his wrist. ‘Switched it to temp-trace. The reading was off the scale.’

Kala was completely amazed. ‘Let me get this straight: are you telling me this box thing had travelled through time?’

‘Yup.’ Jode rubbed his face with his hands. ‘Must’ve followed us back, that’s what I reckon.’

Kala shook her head. ‘No way. This was all above top-secret. Only me, you, Fatboy and Mission Control know we’re here, now.’

‘But the police?’

‘Doesn’t add up. The regular cops haven’t got time-travel capability. Must be something else.’

Jode took a deep breath. ‘I haven’t told you the rest yet. Some people came out of the box.’

Kala’s eyes narrowed. ‘Definitely some kind of travel capsule, then?’

‘Must be. Tight squeeze, though. Two male Caucasians, one female

Asian.

Made no attempt at concealment. They met up with some locals, seemed harmless enough. What d'you make of that?'

'I don't know.' Kala thought for a moment, tapping her lips with her thumb.

'Could be illegals, I suppose. Rogue jumpers. Could be anything!'

'We've got to find out what,' Jode told her. 'Another group of time travellers here could seriously jeopardise the mission.'

'Talking of which,' said Fatboy, still staring into the green flare of his scanner,

'I think I've got something. Just a blip – but it might be what we're after.'

Kala and Jode crowded around the younger man to check the scanner reading for themselves. 'What's that grid reference?' asked Kala.

'Village,' said Fatboy. 'Central.'

Jode sat back with a grunt. 'Forget it – it's just picked up that police box thing on a sweep.'

Kala hissed through her teeth. 'I don't like it. Were you compromised?'

'They might've spotted me later,' Jode confessed, and Kala winced. 'I followed them to the big house.'

Fatboy looked up. 'The Grange?'

'Did they go inside?'

'They were invited in.'

Kala whistled lowly. 'So, they do have friends here. Maybe they're regular visitors.'

'I was trying to get more data when one of them spotted me from the back window,' Jode sounded grim. 'The likelihood is they are illegals. We'll have to deal with them.'

Kala sat back and ran a hand through her hair. 'Oh boy. I just *love* it when things get complicated.'

Tom Carlton arrived at Rigby's house with a slight feeling of trepidation. He never liked visiting the dentist, but he'd chipped a tooth last weekend and wanted it seen to. He'd made an appointment with Rigby because the next nearest dental surgery was in Penton, and it was just too inconvenient to have to travel that far.

As Carlton opened the gate and walked up the path towards Rigby's front door, he resolved to broach the subject of the man's relationship with Liam after he'd had the tooth looked at. He had no wish to offend Rigby, and he frankly couldn't give a damn if Liam continued to see him every day for the rest of his life, but he'd promised Gwen and it had to be done. But there was no reason to go looking for trouble.

He just wished Liam would hurry up and join the goddamned army, and get out of his life. Things would be so much better between him and Gwen if the 29

little brat wasn't there at all.

Rigby's front door was already ajar. There was nothing unusual about this, so Carlton pushed it open and went inside. He had to duck in the narrow hallway as a large wasp buzzed past his head and made for the open air.

'Hi there,' he called. 'Anyone home?'

The front room had been converted into a dental surgery, so Carlton opened the door and went straight in. He was relieved to see Rigby already in there, standing with his back to the door.

'Sorry,' Carlton said, a little louder. 'But I didn't hear you say –'

'Lie down,' said Rigby. 'On the couch. Please.'

Carlton frowned. Rigby didn't sound very well. His voice was thick and guttural, as if he had a sore throat. Carlton didn't fancy picking up a cold or anything, so he said, 'If it's not a good time, I can come back another day.'

Only it isn't urgent, you understand.'

'It's all right,' coughed Rigby, still with his back to the room.

'Um,' said Carlton. 'OK.' He got on to the dentist's reclining chair and lowered himself back. 'You don't sound so good, friend. Are you sure

you're OK?'

'I'm. . . fine.' Rigby's voice was a hoarse croak. Carlton twisted around to look at him. The dentist was turning to face him now, and he looked ill. His skin was pasty and grey, and he looked like he'd swallowed something bad. In fact, he looked like he was about to throw up any minute.

As Carlton sat up in the chair, he caught sight of Rigby's hands. They were covered in little red swellings, almost like a rash. 'God, what happened to you? Those look like stings. Are you OK?'

As Rigby approached, the man seemed to balk. He choked and coughed, holding his hand in front of his face to catch whatever came up.

What came up was a wasp.

A live one.

It landed in the palm of Rigby's hand, squirmed around and then took off.

It flew haphazardly across the surgery, buzzing frantically.

Aghast, Carlton looked back at Rigby. He was standing, looking every bit as shocked and horrified as Carlton was, with his mouth hanging open.

And his mouth was full of more wasps.

They were buzzing loudly, milling around on his tongue and over his teeth and lips.

Carlton felt his marmalade and toast turning in his stomach. He tore his gaze away from the mouthful of wasps and looked at Rigby's eyes. Rigby was staring right back at him. Then, as Rigby gave a sudden convulsion, a stream of wasps flew out of the dentist's open mouth straight at Carlton.

30

He reeled, trying to cover his face with his hands. But the wasps were too fast. He only succeeded in trapping several between his hands and the skin of his face. He felt multiple stings on the palms of his hands and his cheeks and lips.

Carlton rocked off the chair and sprawled across the floor on his hands and knees. More wasps covered his face.

Even through the haze of pain and panic, Carlton realised the most terrible thing.

The wasps were trying to get between his lips.

Into his mouth.

31

Chapter Six

They had elevenses on the lawn of the Pink House. The name had caused some amusement: apparently it was what the Grange had always been locally and affectionately called.

The atmosphere inside had been a little strained at first. There was a definite tension between the Pink brothers, although they sometimes appeared to be simply making fun of each other. Eventually Squire Pink had made his excuses and left, heading into the village on some kind of business. The TARDIS

crew were left in the company of Hilary, who suggested that they all go out into the garden. It was turning into a beautiful summer's day, and, he said, if someone wanted to keep an eye on them they could now do so much more easily. He, after all, had nothing to hide. Anji had smiled at his rebellious instinct – here was a man who refused to be intimidated by anyone or anything. Revitalising, dynamic and unafraid. He was like a breath of fresh air in a stuffy room.

In some ways he actually reminded her of the Doctor.

The Doctor himself had rustled up more tea and a tray full of sandwiches.

They sat out on the lawn at an ornate, wrought-iron table with three chairs.

Hilary had produced a rather worn straw hat with a wide brim, which he stuffed on top of his head. Anji sat and closed her eyes, soaking up the increasing warmth of the sun.

Fitz, for his part, remained unsettled and touchy. He spent all his time glancing in the direction of the bushes where the watcher had been.

The Doctor had elected to sit on the grass in the shade of a massive oak, intent, perhaps, on preserving his natural pallor. He leaned against the bole of the tree and chewed thoughtfully on a piece of long grass, hands behind his head. It was easy to believe he was falling asleep, but the slight glimmer between his half-closed eyelids suggested that he was in fact fully alert and positioned so that he also could watch the rhododendron bush.

The only other things that spoiled the picnic were the wasps, several of which insisted on trying to take part. Fitz in particular took exception to them, madly flapping his arms as if he was trying to communicate something very urgent by semaphore. 'I can't stand insects,' he growled, 'but I reserve a special disgust for wasps. Ugh!'

'Stop waving your arms about like that,' advised the Doctor from his posi-33

tion in the shade. 'It only attracts the wasps and agitates them. You're much less likely to be stung if you just sit still.'

'That's easy for you to say,' Fitz spat back. 'They're not after your grub.'

'It's the sugar they want,' said Anji. Another wasp floated over the table, homing in on the pot of strawberry jam.

'Put some jam on a plate and leave it over there,' suggested the Doctor, waving vaguely at the far corner of the lawn. 'It should distract them.'

Anji reached for the jam jar but failed to see a wasp that had settled on the far side of the rim. 'Youch!' She yanked her hand back. 'Bloody thing stung me!'

'Steady on!' said Hilary. It took Anji a moment to realise he had been surprised by her swearing – although he was now looking at her with renewed admiration.

The Doctor was already on his feet, leaning over the table. Anji held her hand out to show him the small red swelling between her thumb and forefinger, but he looked straight past it at the jam jar. The weight of Anji's hand had forced the wasp into the jam, where it was now well and truly stuck. It buzzed feebly and waved its long antennae.

'*Vespidae vulgaris*,' said the Doctor. 'Common wasp. You can tell by

the facial markings: very distinct yellow and black pattern.'

'Ugly bugger,' commented Hilary Pink, peering into the jar. 'Big as a flaming bee.'

'Bees and wasps come in all shapes and sizes. There are hundreds of different subspecies and varieties. This one is one of the largest, though, I'll give you that.'

'Bees and wasps both buzz, fly, and sting,' said Fitz. 'Big difference.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'The wasp can sting repeatedly; a honeybee can only sting once. Its sting is barbed, so that it gets stuck in the flesh and then usually pulls the venom sac out when the bee flies off. It's usually fatal for the bee, and pretty nasty for the person who's stung.'

'I suppose I should consider myself lucky, then,' said Anji sardonically.

'My dog was killed by a wasp when I was a boy,' commented Hilary. 'Black Labrador bitch, a real beauty. Swallowed the damn wasp – it stung her on the tongue, which then swelled up and choked her to death.'

'Blimey,' said Fitz.

Hilary gave a resigned shrug. 'It was a long time ago, but those kinds of memories stay with you, don't they?' He was staring at the insect trapped in the jam as it slowly died, his expression blank.

'I've always preferred butterflies myself,' declared the Doctor, standing up and looking around the garden as if hoping to find one.

* * *

34

Squire Pink walked into Marpling. He enjoyed the exercise, and it was such a lovely day. He walked with a stick, but it was really only for show, and always provoked a series of injudicious comments from Hilary.

His younger brother irritated him no end. He loafed his way through life, never lifting a finger to do any work or actually help anyone. He protested about things a lot of the time – the war had been a favourite, of course, and really marked the start of the rot. Hilary had

been lucky not to be locked up for his outspoken beliefs on that particular subject. A conscientious objector

– in the Pink family! It was only his family connections that had saved him from prison.

Since then Hilary had drifted aimlessly through a haze of alcohol and, for some strange reason, kept coming back from his more cosmopolitan London haunts to the family home in Marpling. Sometimes he went away for months or even years, but he always came back again. No one in the village was ever pleased to see him, although Squire Pink himself had actually found himself looking forward to his brother's colourful, unpredictable visits.

Not that he would ever let Hilary know that.

Take this new lot of friends, for instance. Hilary's friends were always odd, without exception, usually artists and writers and fellow drinkers, liberals, communists and what have you. But the Doctor and his two young companions – strangely enough Pink didn't think of the Doctor himself as *young* –

were stranger still. The Doctor looked like some sort of demented gypsy poet, but Pink could tell that he was a bright spark all right. The girl appeared incredibly well-spoken and educated for a foreigner. And even the Kreiner lad, shifty-eyed as he was, had the look of someone who had seen a lot of life and survived it all. Pink couldn't help warming to them, although he reminded himself to keep a certain distance. Being acquaintances of Hilary, they would either be very transient – probably gone by the time he got back from the village – or else they would let him down. Knowing his luck they would turn out to be opportunist thieves, just waiting for Hilary to drink himself insensible so they could burgle the Grange.

Squire Pink tried to dismiss this worrisome notion from his mind and concentrate on the day's work. He was due to meet Tom Carlton at the crossroads leading into Marpling to discuss the restoration of the church roof. Carlton was an engineer – an American – and he had offered his expertise in helping to renovate St Cuthbert's failing steeple joists.

But at the crossroads Carlton was nowhere to be found. There was the signpost pointing to Marpling and Horningsham, and the brand-new, bright-red GPO telephone box on the corner, but no sign of Carlton.

'Where the devil's he got to?' muttered the Squire, swiping at a wild

lavender thicket with his walking stick. The fragrance drifted up slowly as he 35

waited. Squire Pink valued punctuality very highly – something entirely lacking in his younger brother – and simply abhorred tardiness. But Carlton had never let him down before. He'd always been most professional in his dealings with the Squire.

Pink wandered a little further down the road towards the village itself, hoping perhaps to spot the man hurrying along. He'd married Gwen Jarrow a year ago and lived with her near the middle of Marpling.

The Squire stopped when he saw the body.

He knew instantly that it was the body of a man – the legs were half sprawled in the road, the torso lying in the ditch alongside. He hurried over, for a single moment thinking – hoping – that it was just someone asleep, a tramp perhaps. One of Hilary's friends in a typically drunken stupor.

But instinctively he knew that something was badly wrong.

As he neared the body, a number of flies leapt away, including a couple of large wasps. The Squire lashed his stick at them with a curse.

The body was lying face down in the roadside ditch. He wasn't really surprised to see that it was Tom Carlton – he recognised the man's gaudily checked jacket easily enough. Frowning, the Squire heard himself saying,

'Carlton? What's up, man? I say, are you all right?'

The Squire knelt down and, gripping Carlton's shoulder, pulled the man over with some effort.

And recoiled in horror at what he saw.

'There's a phone ringing,' said Fitz, opening one eye. He was lying on the grass with his head resting on his folded-up jacket, relaxing in the sunshine.

'I'll answer it,' said Hilary, already heading back to the house. 'It's probably for George.'

Anji was examining the wasp sting on her hand, which was starting to

itch horribly. The Doctor had assured her that it would last only a couple of hours.

At the moment he was sitting cross-legged on the picnic table, minutely examining a butterfly that had miraculously alighted on his open hand.

‘Worried about it starting a storm somewhere?’ asked Anji mischievously as she squinted up at him.

The butterfly took to its wings and fluttered away. ‘Unusually small for a *Nymphalis polychloris*,’ muttered the Doctor, shielding his eyes as he watched its jerky path over the garden wall.

‘Why do you have to make everything sound significant?’ asked Anji, puzzled.

‘Because everything is significant – to someone or something.’

At that moment Hilary Pink came hurrying back out of the house, calling to them. ‘That was George. There’s been some trouble.’

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They all turned to look at him expectantly. ‘He’s found Tom Carlton in a bad way – lying in a ditch. It seems he’s very ill, and he wants to know if you could come, Doctor.’

Fitz said, ‘He’s not that kind of doc–’

‘Of course I’ll come,’ said the Doctor, springing off the table and grabbing his frock coat. He marched up the garden towards Hilary and the house, suddenly full of the kind of energy that only the very bored offered a sudden chance of activity could possess. Anji and Fitz glanced at each other and quickly followed.

‘Perhaps,’ said the Doctor to Anji, ‘this is the beginning of your storm.’

37

Chapter Seven

They raced to the scene in Hilary Pink’s Bentley, its throaty exhaust tearing up the peace and quiet of the rural lanes. The Doctor sat in the front with Hilary, and, by the time they arrived at the Horningsham crossroads, his long mane of hair was blown right back from his forehead. The Doctor vaulted out of the passenger seat, not bothering

with the door, as soon as they saw Squire Pink waving them down. The car hadn't even come to a halt.

Anji and Fitz quickly followed him out, scrambling across the shiny leather seats, while Hilary turned off the ignition. The three of them caught up with the Doctor just as he reached the body.

'I didn't know whether or not to move him,' Squire Pink was saying. He looked flushed and nervous. 'Didn't seem right to just leave him there, but –'

'Yes, yes, quite,' said the Doctor as he knelt down by Carlton's sprawled form.

'He seems very poorly,' the Squire continued hopelessly. 'I don't think he's conscious, even.'

'He's dead,' said the Doctor simply.

There was a collective intake of breath from those observing.

'Dead?' repeated Anji. A wood pigeon hooted inappropriately from the branches of a nearby tree.

'He was alive when I found him,' protested the Squire. 'He was breathing –'

look, I loosened his collar.'

'We're just too late,' the Doctor said, his lips pursed in either regret or deep thought, it was impossible to tell which.

'Doctor,' said Fitz. 'Look at his face.'

'I know.'

Carlton's face was turned up towards the blue sky. His eyes were still open, but dry and sightless. Beneath them, the flesh was swollen and puckered with red marks. The angry-looking lumps were concentrated around the lips and nose, so much so that his mouth was still pulled open in a rictus of pain.

'Poor blighter,' muttered Squire Pink.

'What happened to him?' breathed Anji.

The Doctor was examining the flesh closely, muttering, 'Some sort of

ur-ticaria. . . ?’

‘Doc, what’s that in his mouth?’ asked Fitz.

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There was something silvery on the exposed teeth.

The Doctor deftly

plucked it out with his finger and thumb and held it up for inspection. They all peered at it closely.

‘Plastic?’ suggested Anji.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘It’s a wing.’

‘An insect wing,’ realised Fitz with distaste.

‘And not just any insect,’ the Doctor said. ‘This is a wasp’s wing.’

‘Oh, hell. . . ’ said Anji with terrible realisation. She held a hand over her mouth. ‘His face.’

‘Wasp stings,’ confirmed the Doctor. ‘He’s covered in them. And look at his hands.’

Carlton’s hands were twisted and swollen, the skin full of densely packed red blotches.

Fitz was shaking his head in disbelief. ‘Cripes, there must’ve been hundreds of them. A swarm!’

‘Are you telling me he’s been stung to death by a swarm of wasps?’ asked Squire Pink, managing to sound both incredulous and furious at the same time.

The Doctor didn’t reply straightaway. Instead he continued to stare thoughtfully at the corpse, the wasp wing still held between his finger and thumb. Fitz automatically began to look around the vicinity for any more wasps. There were none.

‘He must’ve died in agony,’ said Anji dully. She stood up, hugging herself tightly as the full impact of what had happened struck home. She turned away, biting her lip, and saw Hilary Pink standing against the bonnet of his car, staring at the ground. He hadn’t even been able to bring himself to look at the body. Anji wished she hadn’t either.

The Doctor said, 'He probably died of anaphylactic shock. The combined dose of wasp venom in all those stings was too much for his body to cope with, resulting in asphyxiation and coronary thrombosis.' He gently closed the man's eyelids and then stood up.

'I'll have to report it,' said Squire Pink, his mouth dry. 'The hospital or the police. . . '

'It's too late for the hospital,' Fitz pointed out.

'Someone will have to tell his wife, too,' the Squire added. He looked meaningfully at his brother.

Hilary nodded once. 'Yes,' he said resignedly. 'I'll do it.'

Anji didn't miss the significance of the look that had passed between the two men. 'Do you know her?'

'Gwen Carlton,' responded Hilary. 'Yes, I know her.'

'Poor woman.'

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'Yes,' Hilary replied flatly. 'God, she'll be distraught. Will you come with me?'

It was such a direct request that Anji found herself agreeing before she'd even thought about it. At the same moment she realised how much Hilary appeared to be shaken. With a jolt she realised she had probably seen more dead bodies than he had. It wasn't a comforting thought, and the sight of Tom Carlton's corpse, prostrate and empty, made her stomach lurch again.

'We'll all come,' announced the Doctor, abruptly turning and heading for the Bentley.

'I say. . . ' began Squire Pink, but the Doctor just turned and said: 'You stay here with the body if you like. You can call the authorities from the phone box.'

The Squire's mouth shut with an audible plop. He evidently wasn't used to being given instructions.

But the Doctor was already sliding, uninvited, into the driver's seat and turning the ignition. The car snarled into life.

‘Wait a minute, Doctor,’ said Fitz. ‘All of us?’

‘Hilary can break the sad news to the man’s wife,’ explained the Doctor,

‘while we can try to find out where he’s been to pick up all those stings.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Fitz argued as they all clambered into the car. The Doctor gunned the engine and the Bentley tore off with a sharp squeal of tyre rubber. ‘Why the big commotion?’

‘Tell you later,’ shouted the Doctor over the noise of the four-and-a-half-litre engine. They left the Squire and Tom Carlton’s body behind in a plume of blue exhaust. ‘Which way, Hilary?’

Hilary didn’t appear at all perturbed that the Doctor had taken over his car. He began to give him directions in a voice quietened by shock, while Fitz turned to Anji and spread his hands in a ‘Don’t ask me what’s going on, I haven’t a clue’ gesture.

They arrived at Gwen Carlton’s house all too soon, in Anji’s view. Despite the shocking event that had prompted the trip, she had guiltily relished the brief ride in the open-topped Bentley. The roads were empty, and the leaves of the trees formed a canopy of brilliant green above them. Sunlight flickered and flashed through the branches, to be dazzlingly reflected in the car’s bonnet as it sped along the country lanes.

At Hilary’s direction, the Doctor pulled the car up in front of a small house on the outskirts of the village. City dwellers of Anji’s time might have called it a cottage, but there was no thatched roof or roses round the door.

In fact, the front door was wide open and Anji felt a tremor of apprehension.

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‘Won’t she mind us being here as well?’ she asked as they got out. ‘I mean, complete strangers?’

‘Perhaps it would be better if you waited outside,’ agreed Hilary glumly. He produced a handkerchief and wiped his face.

‘You know her pretty well, don’t you?’ realised Anji intuitively.

'I did, once. We had a "thing" going, a long time ago – when she still was Gwen Jarrow. But she ended up marrying Tom Carlton, after her first husband died in the war.'

Anji bit her lip. 'And now this has happened. . . '

Hilary nodded. 'It's bloody tragic.' He glanced up at Anji, embarrassed.

'Sorry, that wasn't necessary.'

She almost laughed. 'Don't worry, I've heard worse.' He raised an eyebrow.

'Besides, it's entirely necessary.'

Anji began to appreciate that Hilary was feeling every bit as awkward as she was. Once again she felt a deep well of apprehension open in her stomach, and, for some reason she could not quite identify, she looked back towards the Doctor. He was still sitting in the car, examining the walnut fascia of the dashboard, long fingers drumming impatiently on the steering wheel. Sensing her attention, he looked up and met her gaze with his wide blue eyes.

Anji turned back to Hilary. 'Go ahead. We'll wait out here.'

'What do you want?' asked Liam Jarrow when he answered the door and found Hilary Pink standing on the step. The man was looking as shifty and uncomfortable as you'd expect, and sweating in the heat.

'Hallo, Liam. Is your mother in? I'd like to have a word.'

Liam took a deep breath and folded his arms. 'What about?'

Hilary Pink seemed to hesitate. 'It's about your stepfather, Liam. It's important. . . '

There was a look in the man's eyes, a very serious look that Liam suddenly found himself responding to. A thrill of apprehension washed through him, almost physical in its intensity. Somehow Liam instinctively knew it was bad news.

Hilary smiled stiffly at Liam as he brushed past him. The boy was at that awkward age, both physically and mentally. He desperately wanted to be grown up, a man – and, more than that, a man of poise and authority. Probably how he imagined his father must have been.

But there was a long way to go. Until age and, perhaps, wisdom lent Liam those particular attributes, he would remain a wiry, almost bookish-looking boy with hair that refused to stay neatly combed and soft, golden-brown eyes.

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For an uncomfortable moment the man and the boy stared at each other, before Hilary broke off and, taking a deep breath, approached the door to the living room.

‘Hilary!’ exclaimed Gwen, when she saw him. She was certainly surprised, and not happily. She looked every bit as fiery and accusing as Hilary remembered her. She had been sitting in the armchair by the window, using the light from the garden to sew by. She was repairing a grey sock – it might have been one of Tom Carlton’s. She put the sock and the needle down and stood up to face him.

‘Gwen,’ Hilary said, his voice thick. He felt disgusted with himself for bringing her this news.

‘What do you want?’ she asked, her surprise making her sound abrupt. ‘I mean –’

He held up a hand to silence her. She glanced at her son, and then looked back at Hilary. The small front room seemed suddenly hot and stuffy. ‘Wh-what’s happened?’

‘I think you’d better sit down, Gwen.’

‘All right, Doctor,’ said Fitz, leaning back against the hot paintwork of the Bentley. ‘What gives?’

The Doctor was still sitting in the driver’s seat, running his hands appreciatively over the controls. Without looking up, he said, ‘Think about it. That man might have died right there in the roadside ditch, but the wasp attack must have occurred somewhere completely different.’

‘How can you know that?’ asked Anji.

‘There were no dead wasps around – and, judging by the state of his hands, I’d say he put up quite a struggle. I’d expect some wasp casualties, even if he’d been overcome by a swarm of them.’

‘And the wing on his teeth?’ asked Fitz.

‘Yes, that’s the other puzzling thing. . . ’ The Doctor looked up, frowning.

‘There was a definite concentration of stings around his nose and lips. Almost as if. . . ’

He trailed off as a wasp flew overhead. They all twisted around to watch it disappear across the lawn.

‘So what are we doing here?’ Fitz asked eventually.

‘Trying to trace his last known movements,’ replied the Doctor. ‘We might be able to find out where he was when the wasps attacked him.’

‘And then?’

But the Doctor had been distracted, his pin-sharp attention shifting suddenly to the door of the cottage.

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Fitz turned to see a boy of about fifteen walking out of the house, looking pale and drawn. He had jet-black hair that had been brushed back from his face but which now hung over his forehead in an untidy fringe. There was a sullen, unwelcoming look in his brown eyes when he saw them all sitting in Hilary Pink’s Bentley.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘This is Anji and Fitz. I’m the Doctor. How do you do?’

‘Are you friends of *his*?’ Liam jerked a thumb back in the direction of the house.

‘Acquaintances,’ said the Doctor easily.

‘How did he – Tom – die?’ asked Liam.

The Doctor hesitated for only a fraction of a second before answering.

‘That’s what we’re hoping to find out. He appeared to have been stung to death – by wasps.’

Anji shot the Doctor a dark look, annoyed that he could appear so indifferent to the boy’s feelings. At the same time, she was concerned about what was going on in the house. How was Hilary managing? How was Gwen Carlton coping with the news? If this youth was her

son, then he seemed to have taken it all very calmly. Almost coolly. But of course the Doctor had already noticed this, assimilated every little tiny detail of the boy's behaviour and mood, and more besides. He was watching Liam with those careful, appraising eyes of his – eyes that could look right through you.

‘Wasps?’ repeated Liam tonelessly.

‘I think I’ve got a trace,’ announced Fatboy in a whisper.

Kala and Jode looked up from the nutrient pills they had been pressing out of bubble packs. That was as far as preparing a meal went for them now.

‘Where?’ asked Kala.

Fatboy tapped the display screen. ‘Sector two-seven. It’s taken me all this time to screen out Jode’s police box. . . ’

‘Hey,’ Jode said. ‘It ain’t *mine*.’

‘Never mind all that,’ snapped Kala, moving into position by Fatboy and his scanner. ‘Where is it?’

Fatboy fine-tuned the instrumentation a little further, biting his lip as he concentrated. ‘It’s not as strong a trace as I’d have hoped for, but. . . *here*.’ He jabbed a finger at the blip on the screen.

‘You’re sure?’

‘What else can it be?’

‘Don’t get cocky, kid,’ warned Jode. ‘We already got one wild card on the scene – the police box. Don’t forget three people came out of it. Any one of 44

them could be carrying anachronistic technology. That’d show up on your box of tricks, too, wouldn’t it?’

Fatboy nodded. ‘This thing could pick up a digital watch within a two-mile radius.’

‘So there you go: one of them’s wearing a watch that isn’t from this time period and the scanner’s found it.’

‘We can’t know that for certain,’ Kala said with a hiss of frustration. She considered the scanner’s little green display for a second longer,

and then came to a decision. ‘But at the very least, we’ve got to eliminate them from the search.’

‘Amen to that,’ said Jode, crunching up his nutrient pills.

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Chapter Eight

He was walking into the village, although it didn’t feel much like walking.

Charles Rigby had always enjoyed the ten-minute walk from his house into Marpling, a particular route that took him across two fields, over a stile and into the lane that led straight past St Cuthbert’s. But he wasn’t enjoying it now.

The hedgerows were full of wild flowers that swayed gently in the midday breeze and the trees were quietly rustling, but he didn’t care.

There was something wrong.

So he was walking, but it didn’t *feel* like walking – almost as if he was inside someone else’s body or using someone else’s legs. Perhaps he was ill. Yes, that was it. He wasn’t feeling well at all, hadn’t all morning in fact. Strange how he should forget that.

He stumbled and coughed. When he regained his balance, his vision had blurred. The trees ahead were just a mishmash of green, jerking around in his line of sight. He wiped a hand down his face. It felt cold and damp.

Ought to see a doctor, he thought.

Was that why he was going into the village? He had forgotten already.

Hadn’t felt as ill as this for years. No, that wasn’t right. He’d *never* felt as ill as this at all. He was burning up inside, his stomach heaving and cramping.

His head pounded. What was the matter with him? Perhaps it was something he’d eaten. If only he could remember. The day so far was just a fog in his mind. He had to find a doctor. . .

He staggered on, trying to blink his vision back into focus. The greens were pitching wildly about now, and for a moment he saw the blue of the sky, vast and open and free above him. He reached up with his

hand to touch it.

Miss Havers was cycling back from St Cuthbert's after helping the Reverend Ernest Fordyke to prepare Sunday's service. It was her responsibility to choose the hymns, and to 'organise the organist', as Mr Fordyke liked to put it. And Old Mrs Drydwell certainly needed organising. Perhaps, Miss Havers thought, it might be better to pay her a visit now, to give her plenty of warning. If it wasn't 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' then the old dear could get into a bit of a jam.

With this in mind, Miss Havers turned off the main road leading out of Marpling and headed towards Cranny Lane, where Old Mrs Drydwell's house was to be found. It meant pedalling uphill but the incline wasn't so steep.

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She had managed to forget all about the gypsies she had met on the green, and that frightful Pink person. How he could be any relation to Squire Pink, a man of great distinction in these parts, Miss Havers could not guess. The very thought of Hilary Pink made her blood boil. Just recalling his smirking face now made her pedal faster, and in no time at all she had reached the top of the hill.

Which was where she came across Charles Rigby.

He didn't look at all well. He was staggering along the road with one hand held above his head, looking at the sky. At first Miss Havers thought he might be drunk, but she knew Mr Rigby was teetotal and an upstanding member of the Marpling Summer Fair Committee.

Although, it had to be said, he didn't look very upstanding now. In fact, he looked as if he was about to collapse any moment.

'I say!' she called. 'Mr Rigby. Are you all right?'

He dropped his hand as if he had been caught out. In his other hand he appeared to be holding a short iron bar or something. He stood there, swaying slightly, and turned to look at her. For the first time Miss Havers was actually able to see his face, which looked pale and shiny with sweat.

She pedalled slowly towards him. 'Mr Rigby. You look rather poorly, you know. Is there anything the matter?'

He was glaring at her now, with no hint of recognition in his eyes.

They looked extraordinarily bloodshot. He was breathing with some difficulty, too, harsh rasping breaths through his nose. He was keeping his lips clamped firmly shut for some reason.

Miss Havers's attention was oddly drawn towards the bar in Rigby's left hand. It didn't really look like iron or any kind of metal. Nor was it a piece of wood. It was smooth and black and – Then Miss Havers saw a couple of wasps flying around the man's hand and wrist. He didn't seem to have noticed them.

'Look out, Mr Rigby. Wasps!' Miss Havers gestured towards the insects, but the man didn't react.

Miss Havers found this very odd.

And it was then that her initial concern transformed into an actual *frisson* of fear.

Rigby walked towards her – no, not walked: staggered. But it wasn't the loose stumble of a drunk: it was the stiff-legged march of a man in terrible pain. His eyes were wide and red-rimmed, staring at her unnaturally. He raised his one free hand, and Miss Havers could see that there were more wasps crawling all over the outstretched fingers.

'Now wait there just one moment, Mr Rigby. . . ' She tried to sound authori-tative, but her voice came out as a sort of squeak.

He was standing right in front of her now, and he still hadn't said a word.

* * *

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The Reverend Ernest Fordyke was sorting out the hymn books. Miss Havers had done her best, but she would insist on putting them in order of tattiness

– those in best condition at the front, with the oldest and worst kept at the very back. This meant, in simple terms, that those sitting at the front of the church on Sunday morning would get the best hymn books, and those in the rearmost pews would get the shabby ones. This didn't set well with Fordyke's conscience, but he waited until Miss Havers had left before jumbling them all back up again.

As he worked, Fordyke's mind fluttered over a number of concerns:

the church roof restoration, naturally, which was ridiculously slow; Bert May-berry's recently diagnosed liver cancer – what *would* his wife do without him?

Old Mrs Drydwell's inability to play a tune on the organ that sounded like anything other than 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'; the decided rudeness of Hilary Pink; the state of the weeds on the vicarage front lawn. His thoughts wandered, relaxed and unhurriedly, over all these matters and more besides.

He was just thinking again about the gypsies Miss Havers had reported so colourfully when he heard a commotion from outside the church. He popped the final stack of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* down on the back of the final pew and turned around just in time to see Miss Havers herself coming running –

running – into the church.

For a moment Fordyke considered the possibility of her being pursued by a band of torch-carrying gypsies led by Hilary Pink. But the look of mute, pallid horror on the woman's face squashed flat all thoughts of a humorous nature.

'Miss Havers – whatever's the matter?' Fordyke rushed to meet her, steered her gently to a pew to sit down. Miss Havers fairly collapsed into the seat, her breath ragged and uneven. She looked deathly white. Her hat was half falling off her head. Fordyke deliberated on the propriety of removing it himself, but decided against it.

'Catch your breath,' he advised her. 'Would you like a glass of water, or something stronger? Tea, perhaps?'

She ignored him, preferring to sit and pant, leaning her head against one hand clenched into a bony fist. The knuckles were pressed to her lips, which were nothing more than a thin white line across her face. Her eyes were shut tightly, her forehead creased beneath a sheen of perspiration.

'Has there been an accident?' Fordyke enquired. 'Is someone hurt? Are *you* hurt?'

She shook her head briefly, and without opening her eyes. Fordyke patted her gently on the shoulder and stood up, half wanting to stay with her but half wanting to go out and see if he could find the cause of the trouble. Miss Havers was leaning further forward now, resting her head against the back of the pew in front, almost as if kneeling in

prayer. The hat finally slid off her 49

head and rolled away under the bench.

Fordyke was racked with indecision. He noticed that Miss Havers had her hand clamped over her mouth now – almost as if she was going to be sick.

Oh no.

Fordyke darted forward, but then hesitated. ‘Miss Havers – can I get you anything? Anything at all?’ He fully expected her to nod and blurt out, ‘Yes, a bloody bucket, you fool!’ but she said nothing.

‘I’m going outside,’ he told her. ‘To ask Mr Williams to come in. Perhaps he can –’ Fordyke couldn’t actually think of what his verger could do to help at that moment, but he knew he wanted someone else in here with him. If Miss Havers should be physically ill, he didn’t want to be on his own.

But Miss Havers was already beginning to calm down. Her breathing was becoming more regulated, and she was sitting up slightly. Her eyes were still shut, but she had taken her hand away from her mouth at last – which was surely a good sign, Fordyke hoped.

Perhaps she had received a shock of some sort.

Fordyke received a shock all of his own when he heard a terrified cry from outside the church. A male voice was raised in panicky fear. Fordyke recognised it all too easily – Williams, the verger.

He ran outside, because the noise hadn’t stopped. At first Fordyke thought Williams might have hit his foot with the shovel he had been using to tidy the edges of the cemetery lawn, but the man’s startled yelps had suddenly transformed into a scream of full-blooded agony.

What *was* it about today?

Williams was lying on the grass verge next to a large gravestone. He was thrashing wildly about, screaming, as a swarm of wasps enveloped his head and shoulders. His face was completely obliterated by the insects, simply a mass of crawling black and yellow. As Fordyke stood, transfixed, he saw Williams roll on to his back and open his mouth to scream once more.

And his mouth, too, was full of wasps.

Fordyke stepped backwards, the gorge rising in his own throat, as the body of his verger flapped about like a fish on land. The wasps were everywhere, flying all around, crawling over the gravestones, but mostly they were concentrating their attack – that was the only word for it, *attack* – on Williams.

The verger couldn't scream properly any more; his cries were turning into guttural chokes and coughs. His movements were becoming less violent, but more spasmodic. Eventually he lay still, apart from the blanket of wasps that covered his face and body like an improvised shroud. He twitched for a few moments, the fingers of his hands curling and uncurling, until they too went slack.

Fordyke crossed himself.

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It occurred to him as well that he should have done something to save the man, but for the life of him he couldn't think what.

Then he wondered if the wasps, having killed Williams, might turn on *him*.

He took another step backwards, and jumped when he knocked into someone else.

Standing right behind him was Miss Havers, looking straight at the insect-covered body on the grass. She still looked pale, but otherwise unmoved.

Fordyke looked back at the verger's body. It was deathly still, and many of the wasps were flying away. Williams had come to rest in front of an impressive-looking gravestone bearing the moss-lined inscription, O DEATH, WHERE IS THY STING? O GRAVE, WHERE IS THY VICTORY?

'Oh, dear me. . . ' Miss Havers said quietly.

They formed an interesting tableau, for a minute or so at least: the vicar, standing with his hands pressed together as if he was praying; the woman, covering her mouth with a small lace handkerchief; the corpse on the ground in front of them, still warm, still full of now useless lifeblood.

Charles Rigby stood on the far side of the cemetery, watching them.

He was behind the stone wall that encompassed the church ground, in the shade of a large maple. The bark of the maple was full of mites and grubs and tiny millipedes. The churchyard itself, with its many graves, was naturally full of more creatures – beetles, worms, the inevitable maggots. Many of them were already hurrying towards the dead flesh lying on the edge of the grass.

Rigby didn't smile, although he felt like smiling. The wasps had left the man's body now; it was useless, dead. They rose on the warm air currents, floating over the cemetery, showing him what they could see – the ground, the sky, the spots of bright colour where the lawns were dotted with wild flowers.

Stronger than the things they saw were the things they smelled: the odour of the corpse was so full and attractive. Every creature in the churchyard could detect it, knew what it meant.

The wasps came back to him, swirling around him.

Rigby stood for several more seconds, watching the vicar and the woman.

Their names came to him eventually – Fordyke and Havers. The wasps had wanted to attack Fordyke – they had sensed him as the nearest human being after the verger had died – but Rigby had decided against it. So the wasps had returned to him like eager little slaves. He liked that. It meant that he controlled them, which was how it should be. How the thing he still clutched in his hand told him it should be.

When all the wasps had come back to him, Rigby turned and walked away from the church.

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Chapter Nine

Charles Rigby's house was reasonably large, built from the ubiquitous sand-coloured Bath stone and set in beautifully kept gardens front and back. There was a white-painted gate across the top of the driveway, which had been left conveniently open. The Doctor powered Hilary Pink's Bentley between the gateposts with only a hair's breadth to spare on either side, somehow fishtailing the back of the powerful car as he braked so that the vehicle ended up parked across the driveway, parallel to the entrance.

Once again, the Doctor vaulted out of the car without opening the

door.

Fitz clambered out with a little more wariness, and Liam Jarrow looked as though he was simply glad to be back on firm ground. Indeed, the way the Doctor had driven the Bentley here, it might as well have flown. 'There's not a moment to lose!' he'd cried over the howl of the slipstream as the car had dashed along the country lanes from Liam's house.

'There never is,' Fitz had shouted back.

Even now, the Doctor had covered the remaining few yards to Rigby's front door in three easy strides and rung the bell. They all listened to the faint *ding-dong* from within.

'No one home,' said Fitz a few seconds later.

'It's a beautiful day,' observed the Doctor, apparently without a trace of irony, practically bouncing on his feet in front of the heavy door. 'He might be in the back garden.'

'He'd have heard us arrive,' Fitz said, looking meaningfully at the Bentley and the twin black trails of rubber stretching from the gates to the rear wheels.

'He normally has a surgery today,' Liam told them. 'He should be in.'

The Doctor rang the bell again, this time keeping his finger on the button for a good while.

'Remind me why we're here,' said Fitz.

'Oh, come on, Fitz – keep up!' admonished the Doctor.

'Sorry, but I left my stomach behind at that last blind corner, and my brain at the hairpin bend before that.'

'It might have been nothing,' Liam said. 'Just a coincidence. . . '

The Doctor whirled around, fixing the boy with a stare from beneath heavy eyelids. 'You said there was a wasps' nest.'

'There was, yes – in the shed. But. . . well, it could be a coincidence, like I said.'

The Doctor was already shaking his head. 'No no no. You said your stepfather had an appointment with Charles Rigby this morning, yes? And that last night you disturbed a nest of wasps in Mr Rigby's shed.' He straightened a finger for each point, and then a third: 'Half an hour ago we found the body of your stepfather, who appears to have died following an attack by a swarm of wasps.'

'You've got to admit,' said Fitz quietly, 'it does seem a tad on the suspicious side.'

Liam was clearly ready to back down now. 'Yes, but. . . '

'Believe me, we have some experience in this kind of thing,' Fitz continued.

'However,' he directed this next at the Doctor, 'I'd still like to know exactly what you hope to find here.'

The Doctor had given up on the front door, and was peering unabashed through the window of the nearest room, cupping his hands around his eyes to eliminate reflection. 'Surgery's empty,' he reported. 'We're trying to trace Tom Carlton's last movements, Fitz.' He stepped back from the surgery window and squinted up at the second-storey windows. 'I want to see this wasps' nest Liam found.'

Fitz was looking around the front garden. The lawn was perfect and weed-less, the sign of a dedicated and careful gardener. There were trees lining the sides of the lawn, and at one side of the house were a number of fruit-bearing trees. On one of them he could see a large number of very ripe plums, dusky purple and red. He could almost smell the sweetness from here. Then, as he looked at them, he suddenly realised that there were things moving among the fruit: busy little points of black and yellow.

He took a cautious step closer, and his misgivings were confirmed: wasps.

They were flying all around the plums, and in and out of several which had been half eaten away. He could see one very clearly: the insects were flying carefully into a cavity in the soft flesh, disappearing beneath the purple skin to eat the rotting material within. And, attracted by the spoiled fruit, a legion of ants were crawling all over the tree, stealing what they could while the wasps mined the rest.

'There's a good few wasps here,' Fitz said, making no attempt to hide

his disgust.

The Doctor bounded over. 'Good, good. We're on the right track, then. Pity about the plums.

'Oh, yeah.' Fitz nodded sardonically. 'Terrible shame.' He couldn't remember the Doctor even passing comment about the death of Tom Carlton.

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But the Doctor was already hurrying around the side of the house, ducking under one of the branches of the plum tree. When Fitz and Liam had caught up, he was unlatching the side gate that led to the rear of the house.

'Doctor, are you sure. . . ?'

'What?' the Doctor glanced at him with an innocent expression. 'He's not at home; there's nothing to worry about.' And, so saying, he opened the gate and stepped through.

'There's the shed,' said Liam, pointing down to the bottom of the garden.

'Is it?' the Doctor said heavily. 'Thanks for that.'

'Don't mind him,' Fitz advised Liam. 'He likes to make out he's fantastically clever, that's all. You're looking at a man who can recognise a garden shed anywhere.'

'Window's broken,' the Doctor pointed out as they approached the shed.

'It wasn't yesterday,' Liam offered.

'That's how the wasps got out, then,' the Doctor added, peering in through the shattered glass.

'Rigby must have smashed the window in,' said Fitz.

The Doctor shook his head, pursing his lips thoughtfully as he regarded the shards of glass on the ground by the shed. 'Wrong displacement of glass for that,' he muttered. 'It was broken from the inside.'

'Wait – look.' Fitz had walked around to the shed's open door. 'This is

bust, too.’ The hasp that had held the shed’s padlock had been torn away by brute force, long white splinters of wood standing proud from the door frame.

‘Something big and powerful must have wanted to get out in a hurry.’

The Doctor gently touched one of the spikes of wood. ‘No – this is exactly the opposite. Something big and powerful – or, at least, powerful – wanted to get *in* the shed in a hurry. The lock’s simply been torn away.’ He mimed the action of grasping the latch in one hand and wrenching it free of the wood.

‘It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Nothing does, until you know the reason why,’ remarked the Doctor. ‘Until then, all we have are questions, such as: how did you come to be rooting around in Mr Rigby’s shed, anyway?’ This was directed at Liam, who suddenly found himself facing the full attention of a pair of piercingly quizzical blue eyes.

‘He wanted to show me something he’d found in his garden.’ Liam was beginning to mumble, and Fitz guessed he now regretted involving what must appear to be two complete madmen. ‘I don’t know what it was. I’ve never seen anything like it before.’

‘Describe it.’

‘About this long.’ Liam held his hands about a foot apart. ‘Black. And smooth – very smooth.’

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The Doctor frowned for a moment, and then promptly turned and ducked into the shed. ‘Where is it?’

Liam peered gingerly past a dark velvet sleeve, half expecting a horde of angry wasps to shoot out again. ‘It was in a shoebox, on the workbench.’

The Doctor knelt down in the shed and picked up a shoebox that lay on its side on the wooden floor. It was clearly empty. He discarded it with a flick of his wrist.

‘I think I must have dropped it when the wasps appeared,’ murmured Liam apologetically. ‘Perhaps it rolled. . . ?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, his eyes raking the debris on the floor, quickly taking in the old crates, paint tins and garden tools. He found a strangely shaped scrap of something like papier-mâché. ‘But here’s the remains of your wasps’

nest. Nothing extraordinary about that.’ He stood up and handed the papery substance to Liam. Liam took it, sniffed it and gave it to Fitz, who held it cautiously between finger and thumb.

‘It’s paper,’ he said.

The wasps make it from pulped wood shavings,’ explained the Doctor. ‘They scrape bits of wood off trees and fences and make it into part of the nest.’

‘Fascinating fact number three thousand four hundred and eighty-one,’ responded Fitz, handing the thing back. ‘But not of any immediate use.’

‘Wait wait wait,’ said the Doctor with sudden excitement, swooping on something else that had caught his eye on the floor. He picked up a small, glassy shard of something black and smooth. It was barely an inch long, rounded at one end but plainly broken at the other. ‘Liam, could this be part of the thing Mr Rigby showed you?’

‘Um, it could be. I don’t really know – I only had a tiny glimpse of it before the wasps –’

‘Yes, yes, but it *could* be.’ The Doctor inspected the fragment closely, stepping back out of the shed and holding it up to the light. It remained a uniform, featureless and utterly nonreflective black, except for the broken surface, which glinted an electric green in the midday sun. ‘What else could it be? It’s like –’

‘Nothing on Earth?’ ventured Fitz.

The Doctor caught his glance but stayed silent.

Kala’s eyes reflected the green of the imaging sensor’s display. Her lips were pressed into a thin line of dissatisfaction. Fatboy wouldn’t have been able to tell, but Jode knew her well enough to read the signs, and detect the flash-burn of real anger behind the green in those eyes.

‘Why do we have to rely on this crappy old junk?’ she hissed. She was right on the edge of giving the scanner a hefty whack.

Fatboy twiddled with the controls again. 'It's not old. It's state-of-the-art.'

But for this mission fully interactive 3D displays were considered somewhat ostentatious.' He remained oblivious to the scowl Kala directed at his left ear as he continued: 'This is perfectly suitable for the job – the real problem is that what we're trying to detect with it is designed to *avoid* detection.'

'And that,' said Jode, 'is without the added complication of another set of techno-anachrons floating around the time zone.'

'All *right*,' sighed Kala. 'But I don't want to waste valuable time – no pun intended – eliminating our police-box people if we can find a short cut and trace the flaming thing ourselves. Fatboy?'

Fatboy's eyes remained fixed, as usual, on the scanner display. They seemed to soak up the emerald schematics rather than reflect them, as if the information was passing unhindered straight through the pupils and into his brain. 'I am doing my best to fine-tune the trace. As I have already stated, and Jode has repeated, this would be a difficult task without the background noise of the police-box people. But I think I actually *have* something this time.'

Kala leaned forward, batting the air in front of her face as a butterfly fluttered past. 'Tell me.'

'This location.' Fatboy indicated the map schematic. 'Simple dwelling place, situated about a klikk from here. This particular trace has been moving recently, but it seems to have come to a rest. The interesting thing is that I've got a residual blur moving in on the main trace.'

'Residual blur?' Jode snapped. 'What the hell's that in normal talk?'

Fatboy didn't even blink. 'Police-box people.'

Jode looked at Kala, who was thinking the same thing: 'They're after it, too.'

'Let's go!' Kala got up into a half-crouch, not wanting to put too great a strain on her SNS suit circuits. 'You stay here, Fatboy. Keep a lock on the main trace. Jode and I'll move in and kill this thing now.'

'Of course, this isn't *technically* breaking and entering,' said the

Doctor. ‘But it’s not exactly legal in this day and age to enter someone’s house without their permission.’

Liam Jarrow couldn’t see what the Doctor was doing with the back door of Charles Rigby’s house, but he clearly heard the lock click open. The Doctor had contrived to position his body so that whatever trick he used to bypass the mechanism remained a mystery. Liam was instantly fascinated, although Fitz appeared to be looking the other way entirely, almost uninterested, as if he had seen it all before. Or maybe he was just keeping a watchful eye open for Charles Rigby himself. With a jolt Liam realised exactly what the Doctor had just been saying. ‘Erm, I don’t think we should be doing this,’ he commented 57

weakly as the door swung open and the Doctor stepped unhesitatingly inside.

‘I mean, I don’t think *I* should go in.’

‘Nonsense,’ the Doctor retorted. ‘You’re the one who knows where everything is.’

‘Yes,’ added Fitz. ‘Where does Rigby keep all his strange alien artefacts?’

‘I told you – in his shed.’

‘Very droll.’ Fitz pushed past the boy and followed the Doctor inside. Nervously Liam stepped in after him. The Doctor was picking up one of the kitchen chairs and setting it back on its legs.

‘Sign of a struggle?’ Fitz wondered.

‘Possibly.’ The Doctor made a quick circuit of the kitchen, pulling open drawers and cupboards and looking inside.

‘Cutlery. . .

cups, saucers. . .

food. . . Aha! Quaker Porridge Oats! It’s years since I had any porridge!’

‘Never could stand the stuff,’ grumbled Fitz. He picked up a newspaper from the kitchen table, scanned the headlines and tossed it back down, folded in two. ‘Can we get a move on, Doctor? We may

not technically be burglars, but he's hardly likely to hide whatever it is you're looking for in a packet of porridge oats, is he? And Anji'll be wondering where the hell we've got to.'

The Doctor just glanced at Fitz for a moment, almost as if he was trying to remember who Anji was. Then he said, 'OK, we'll try the rest of the house.'

He grabbed the handle of the door that led from the kitchen into the hall and pulled it open.

Standing on the other side was a tall man, staring directly at him with sore-looking eyes.

'Good afternoon!' exclaimed the Doctor without missing a beat. Behind him Fitz had taken a sharp breath and Liam let out a muffled 'eek!' of surprise.

'Mr Rigby, isn't it?'

'What. . . what are you doing here?' the man said in a low and unmistakably menacing growl. He didn't look much like the Charles Rigby Liam had known from only the previous day. His skin was pasty and his hair was in un-characteristic disarray. He was speaking through gritted teeth, his lips barely moving. His unblinking eyes seemed dark and piercing, although bloodshot around the irises. And then there was the smell – a slightly acidic odour that filled the little kitchen and caught at the back of the throat.

'We were just wondering –' the Doctor had just begun to say when Liam interrupted desperately.

'I'm sorry, Mr Rigby. I told them not to come inside! We're not trying to steal anything: we were just looking. . . I mean, the back gate was open and. . .'

Rigby turned his baleful glare on Liam but said nothing. The look was enough to silence the boy's fumbling excuses and apologies. But it wasn't 58

a look of anger or even disgust – it was merely one that utterly failed to recognise him.

Liam swallowed dryly under the unnerving gaze. 'Mr R-Rigby? Are you all right?'

The Doctor stepped unobtrusively in front of the boy, inserting himself between Liam and the terrible stare. Rigby's eyes refocused – slowly, it seemed

– on the Doctor's face. 'Well, Mr Rigby? You don't look all right – if you don't mind my saying so. I'm the Doctor – perhaps I could help?'

Rigby's lips parted fractionally. His jaw worked strangely around the words as he replied: 'Get out of my. . . house.'

The Doctor seemed taken aback. 'I'm sorry – I only do house calls.'

'Get. . . out.'

'Perhaps we can talk? Over a nice cup of tea?'

Rigby took one lumbering step forward, his eyes never leaving the Doctor's own. 'Get. . . out.'

'Doctor, I think Mr Rigby would like us to get out,' said Fitz.

The Doctor retreated a step, but managed to push Liam back further, so that he was standing on the far side of the kitchen table with Fitz. Rigby continued to advance ponderously towards the Doctor.

A wasp floated into the kitchen after Rigby and settled on the back of a chair, its yellow legs and stripes bright against the dark wood.

Everyone looked at it.

The hairs stood up on the back of Liam's neck. Fitz must have felt a similar reaction, because he picked up the folded newspaper again and drew it back, preparing to strike. One fast blow now would flatten the thing for sure.

'Leave it!' ordered Rigby, his voice rising to a harsh rasp. He still kept his teeth clamped together, almost as if he was trying not to throw up.

In his hand he held a gun, pointed directly at Fitz's stomach.

Now everyone looked at the gun.

It was the Webley revolver, Liam noted automatically. With the walnut grips. The same pistol he had held in his own hand the previous evening. But now there was a crucial difference: every one of the revolver's chambers was loaded with a bullet. The shiny brass tip of each shell could be seen resting in its little hole from this close.

Indeed, it was even possible to see, with terrible clarity, Rigby's finger, white-knuckle tight, on the trigger.

Liam tried to swallow, but the action simply died in his throat. He felt incapable of moving, he was so suddenly afraid. Liam felt the sweat spring coldly from his skin as he vividly recalled Rigby's story about shooting the German soldier at point-blank range in the war.

Rigby's grip on the pistol was so tight that his hand was wavering with the tension. The hexagonal barrel drifted between Fitz and the Doctor, as if Rigby 59

couldn't decide whom to shoot first.

After what seemed like an age, the revolver finally came to a halt in front of the Doctor's chest. It was no more than an arm's length from the Doctor himself. Liam sensed rather than saw the Doctor tensing, as if preparing to jump the man, perhaps hoping to wrestle the gun off him before he could shoot. But it would be a suicidal manoeuvre, even this close.

Slowly the muzzle of the gun rose until it was aimed squarely between the Doctor's eyes. The Doctor remained quite motionless, his gaze fixed on the pistol. Rigby's trigger finger tightened fractionally. . .

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Chapter Ten

Anji Kapoor looked out of the living-room window for the zillionth time and wondered what the *hell* was taking the Doctor and Fitz so long. She just knew that they were having a great time, wherever they'd got to. They were a bad influence on each other – all that business with the car! Boys!

She turned away from the window, frustrated and bored in equal measure.

Anji knew what the problem was: she was feeling useless, something she despised. The Doctor and Fitz had rushed off with a purpose in mind, and Hilary Pink was sitting in the kitchen talking very quietly to Gwen Carlton.

Which left Anji, on her own, pacing slowly around Gwen's living room, quietly examining all the personal touches and bric-a-brac of the poor woman's home.

She kept the place clean and tidy, and there was a small silver-framed photo of a young man in uniform on the mantelpiece, next to a large carriage clock that ticked much more loudly than was strictly necessary.

Anji watched the second hand jerk around the clock face. Maybe that was what was bugging her: she was back on Earth for the first time since leaving in the TARDIS, and it felt *strange*. And not just because it was the 1930s.

She'd already considered the fact that she wouldn't be born for another forty years. She had already wondered what her future parents-to-be were doing now, and quickly given up. It was useless speculation, and altered nothing.

She dismissed the thought easily – secretly congratulating herself on her time-travelling coolness – and concentrated on the *now*.

The fact was, she didn't really want to be here. On Earth again. Not yet.

There was still plenty she wanted to do and see around the whole universe.

Somehow it felt like a cheat coming back home so soon. And how ironic that she, whose City-life stock-in-trade was dealing in futures, should find herself stuck out in the sticks nearly seventy years in the past!

She bit her lip. There was nothing she *could* do. At least not until the Doctor and Fitz returned, which irked her just as much. As she stalked around the living room she caught a glimpse of Hilary Pink in the kitchen, still talking earnestly and quietly to Gwen Carlton. Anji couldn't hear exactly what Hilary was saying, but his hands were holding Gwen's tightly.

'Come on, Doctor,' she muttered under her breath. 'Hurry *up*.'

She sneaked another look at Hilary. Now he had a hand on Gwen Carlton's shoulder. Anji felt a twinge of annoyance. How much consoling does the 61

woman need? Can't she get up and *do* something? Take some kind of positive action at least, instead of just weeping into her hanky? But, almost as soon as these thoughts came, they were replaced by a surge of guilt. She overheard Hilary saying something about Gwen's son, in

a voice of soothing comfort: sure he didn't mean it. . . probably respected him greatly, deep down. . . a good man. . . and Liam's a good lad. . . he'll come back soon. . . '

Don't count on it, thought Anji. He's with the Doctor and Fitz, and they're *bound* to be enjoying themselves. . .

Fitz stared on, transfixed. The barrel of the Webley revolver continued to tremble with agonising promise; any second it would be filled with flame and noise, discharging a bullet that would, indisputably, end a life.

‘Don’t make me. . . do this. . . ’ Rigby’s voice was squeezed by pain or even fear into a strangled hiss.

The Doctor’s own voice, by contrast, was quiet and even: ‘I have no intention of making you pull that trigger, Mr Rigby.’

The gun wavered dramatically, and both Liam and Fitz visibly flinched.

The Doctor didn’t even blink. His hypnotic gaze was now fixed on Rigby’s eyes – a single tear had formed in the corner of one and now it ran down the pallid, sweating skin of his cheek like the ghost of a scar.

‘In fact I don’t want you to do anything at all,’ the Doctor continued in the same considered tone. ‘You don’t really want to shoot me, do you?’

Rigby mumbled something, the gun still wobbling in his taut fist. This time his red-rimmed eyes blinked rapidly, and he appeared to lose concentration.

The Doctor said, ‘You don’t have to shoot me. I’m willing to go. So are my friends.’

Rigby’s frightened glare flickered towards Liam, but quickly returned to the Doctor.

‘Perhaps if we just left, now, you could just put the gun away and forget all about it,’ the Doctor continued reasonably. His voice was steady and mellifluous.

Rigby didn’t move, didn’t even seem to be listening any more. But the hand that held the gun was steady. Fitz didn’t know whether that was a good sign or not, so he moved on to the balls of his feet, preparing to run or jump or hit the deck as the situation demanded. He also felt the desperate need for the toilet that, for him, always accompanied the threat of physical violence.

‘When Mr Rigby lets you leave, Fitz,’ said the Doctor calmly, ‘take

Liam with you, get into the car and go. Understand?’

‘Yes,’ replied Fitz, but the dryness in his mouth made it sound more like a tiny croak.

‘Well, Mr Rigby?’ the Doctor asked. ‘Can my friends go?’

62

The gun dipped slightly.

The Doctor’s right hand made a loose gesture, his fingers brushing the material of Fitz’s jacket. Fitz took his cue immediately, jerking his head at Liam in a ‘follow me’ gesture. Hardly daring to breathe, he stepped past Rigby and walked through the hallway beyond, heading for the open front door. He could see Hilary Pink’s Bentley parked on the driveway where they had left it. He checked to see that Liam was following him as he stepped out into the sunshine and then ran towards the car.

‘Wh-what about the Doctor?’ asked Liam, hot on his heels.

Fitz slid into the driver’s seat, found the ignition key and started the engine.

‘Hang on to your hat, sonny, ’cos Uncle Fitzie’s getting us out of here. . .’

‘But the Doctor –’

Fitz twisted around and looked back through the open front door. In the shadows inside it was impossible to see what was happening. He was fully expecting the Doctor to come haring out any moment – or at least, being the Doctor, strolling out casually.

The Bentley’s engine continued to rumble, ready for action.

‘Maybe he’s still talking to Mr Rigby,’ suggested Liam.

‘What about? The weather?’ Fitz squinted into the interior of the house.

‘Come on, Doc. . . ! What are you waiting for?’

‘Should we go back in?’

Fitz looked at him. ‘We’ve just walked out of there with our lives,

thanks to the Doctor. Didn't you see the state your old chum is in? Guns aside, he's evidently bonkers. I'm not going back in there for anything. Besides, the Doctor told us to go.'

'But –'

'Don't *but* me, kid,' Fitz snarled with sudden fury. 'The Doctor knows what he's doing! And so do I!'

Fitz released the handbrake and the Bentley leapt forwards, crushing an azalea. With a curse that wouldn't fall into common usage for another thirty or so years, Fitz crunched the gear stick into reverse, jammed down the throttle and let the car shoot backwards through the gates.

He was still swearing mightily as the Bentley skidded around, engaged forward gear and roared away from Charles Rigby's house.

'Well, now it's just the two of us,' said the Doctor conversationally.

Rigby shook his head, as if trying to make his brain work. He hadn't lowered the gun completely, and his finger was still keeping up the pressure on the trigger. But he felt twitchy and distracted. He and the Doctor had walked around opposite sides of the kitchen table now, reversing their original positions but maintaining the situation.

63

'Do you want to talk about it?' asked the Doctor.

Rigby looked up sharply, perhaps registering what the Doctor was saying, what he was offering. Something in him liked the way the Doctor spoke, the actual sound of his voice. Soothing, unthreatening. And he felt warm and comforted by the word 'Doctor'. Wasn't that what he really needed, after all?

Some pills, perhaps?

But the notion made his stomach heave, and his jaws tighten. The things inside him squirmed and buzzed. His thoughts grew cloudy again, as if the whole world was just a fuzzy mess that he couldn't fathom. The Doctor was speaking again, but this time the words sounded harsh and alien. Aggressive, accusing, provoking. Rigby tried to listen to what he was saying, nevertheless.

The Doctor said, 'Can you talk about it?'

With immense effort, Rigby shook his head.

‘I see,’ said the Doctor.

Rigby guessed the movement of his head had been somewhat spasmodic, and perhaps therefore meaningless. But the Doctor seemed prepared to clutch at any straw. Perhaps Rigby could respond to that, at least.

But he was ill, terribly ill.

He felt his arm rise, and couldn’t stop himself pointing the Webley straight at the Doctor once again.

The Doctor heaved a sigh and said, ‘I’m going to leave now, Mr Rigby. I’ll come back and see you again another time, perhaps. But for now I’m going.

I’m going to turn around. . . and then walk out of here.’

And so he did. For a moment the Doctor’s back was fully exposed. He had simply turned right around, almost asking to be shot. Rigby felt the gun shaking in his hand. He wanted to pull the trigger, send a bullet right into the black velvet between the man’s shoulders. But he couldn’t.

Not in the back, surely.

Not in cold blood.

Yes! Do it!

The Doctor emerged into the afternoon sunshine with a cold, crawling sense of unease right between his shoulder blades. Almost as an afterthought he reached back and pulled Rigby’s front door shut. It was a stout door, oak probably, and enough to stop a .38 bullet from this range. Hopefully.

He let out a long breath, stood still for a moment and then inhaled deeply.

The Bentley was gone. At least Fitz and Liam were safe.

Charles Rigby let out a hiss of breath through his clenched teeth, and almost vomited. He staggered over to the kitchen table and sat down heavily in one of the chairs. The gun banged down on the table, gouging a hole in the old wood.

Rigby's hands shook, the fingers curling in and the hands following, until his arms were crossed over his heart and throat. He sat there and trembled violently for several minutes.

He wanted to sob, but he couldn't. There was something choking him, stopping him from breathing. He could feel a great churning mass inside him, filling him up, blocking off his air as well as his thoughts.

Why hadn't that doctor stayed? Couldn't he see he was ill? Needed treatment?

A wasp floated across his vision, blurred by the tears. It landed on one of his hands. Another crawled out from the cuff of his jacket. The air was full of them now, swirling around his head. Of course. Now he remembered. He wasn't ill at all.

He was just getting better.

Outside, the Doctor began his long walk to catch up with Fitz and Liam. He was turning over the strange behaviour of Charles Rigby in his mind, trying to come up with a plausible explanation, when he heard the scuff of a footstep behind him, a little to the left. Surprised, he started to turn, and saw something shaped like a man rushing up behind him.

Then he was hit by something that felt like a steam locomotive driving straight through his brain.

Chapter Eleven

They took him back to the clearing in the woods, well-hidden from view.

He was of only moderate height and build; Kala found this a little disappointing in a way. She had expected something more impressive, although she couldn't say why. Probably the most striking thing about the man was his face – large and angular, with well-defined features and a rather sensuous mouth, even when unconscious.

Jode dropped him unceremoniously in the dirt, trying not to look as if carrying him had been an effort.

Kala regarded the prisoner coolly for several long seconds, refusing to be rushed. She knew Jode would be waiting to hear what she had to say. So let him wait.

Even by her own scant knowledge of early atomic-age civilisation, Kala could see this man was still an anachronism by choice as well as circumstance. He wore clothes that were entirely unsuited to this era – garments that might have been fashionable a century earlier – but didn't seem to care.

Kala couldn't imagine how anyone could be truly comfortable in all those natural fibres – silk, cotton, leather and the like all seemed so unhygienic and primitive. Yet, for some reason, this eccentric combination of long velvet coat, with the dark, intricately patterned green waistcoat and the loosely bound cravat, just made her want to smile. It was all so *extraordinary*. The man didn't even look equipped to travel in time or steal dangerous technical devices.

'Search him,' she told Jode eventually.

Jode grunted and bent to the task, eventually unearthing a multitude of disparate pocket junk: handkerchief, string, screwdriver, pen, an empty paper bag, a coil of wire, a magnifying glass, an antiquated stethoscope, a folding pocket knife and an old handwritten letter on real paper from someone sign-ing herself 'Mary Minett'. It was dated 22 August 1918 and addressed to her doctor.

Kala folded the letter back up and tossed it back. 'Let me guess: no actual ID?'

'No sign of the device, either,' Jode pointed out. 'In fact, no sign of any tech-nological hardware at all – unless you count this.' He flicked open an antique analogue chronometer attached to the waistcoat by a chain and frowned. The dial had no hands.

67

Kala suppressed a shudder; the man was still out cold, and Jode looked as though he was looting a corpse. She sniffed and leaned forward, prising open one of the man's eyelids. A very blue eye stared back up at her.

'Hello,' he said. 'I'm the Doctor. Mind if I sit up?'

'Yes,' said Jode, immediately pushing the man back down into the dirt with his boot.

‘You must be the gentleman with the stun gun,’ said the Doctor, squinting up at his assailant. ‘I recognise the technique: there’s not much difference between one of those and a good hard kick in the head.’

‘Both can be arranged,’ said Jode.

‘That won’t be necessary,’ the Doctor replied. ‘I’m harmless. Well, mostly harmless.’

Having got over her shock, Kala said, ‘Let him up. He’s cuffed.’

‘Oh, were these meant to be handcuffs?’ asked the Doctor, sitting back up and holding out the wrist-binders that Kala had seen Jode fix in position only minutes before. They were now dangling uselessly from one finger. ‘Sorry.’

‘Watch it, wise ass,’ rumbled Jode, reaching for his weapon.

‘Oh, not the stun gun again,’ moaned the Doctor.

‘*Stun gun?*’ repeated Kala with some amusement. ‘Isn’t that a bit old-fashioned?’

‘Well, *I’m* a bit old-fashioned.’ The Doctor sounded irritated. ‘I suppose you lot call it a neuro-stunner or something. Same difference.’

‘Exactly,’ said Jode. ‘So quit stalling. We want some answers.’

‘Oh, me, too!’ The Doctor brightened immediately. ‘Let’s start with some questions: who are you?’

‘Who are *you?*’ countered Jode.

‘I asked first.’

‘Stop it,’ snapped Kala. She felt as though the situation was getting out of control. This man was completely taking over ‘This is ridiculous. You answer *our* questions, understand?’

‘Or what?’ retorted the Doctor. ‘Are you going to stun me again if I don’t?’

Because I should warn you: I don’t talk in my sleep.’

‘There are other ways of making you talk,’ Jode growled, balling his fists.

The Doctor held up a placating hand. ‘All right, have it your own way. We’ll start with some introductions. I’m the Doctor, as I said. You three appear to be some sort of commando team from the far future, sent back in time to find something – am I right?’

Kala and Jode looked at each other. ‘How –’ began Kala.

‘It’s pretty obvious, if you don’t mind my saying so.’ The Doctor smiled.

‘You’re all wearing camouflage fatigues made from a synthetic material that 68

won’t be invented on this planet for centuries. SNS, if I’m not mistaken: spec-trum nonspecific. The polyprismatic mesh duplicates the colours and shapes of its immediate surroundings, rendering the wearer practically invisible.’

Kala just looked at him.

The Doctor began to return his possessions to his pockets as he spoke. ‘It’s actually very hard to spot unless you know what you’re looking for – or the user is particularly inept.’ He looked hard at Jode when he said this. ‘I assume it was you I saw spying on us in the village this morning. And later at the Squire’s house. Even my friend spotted you there. What was the problem?

Just getting careless or a dud battery?’

‘I’ve had enough of this,’ snarled Jode.

‘Wait,’ ordered Kala. ‘You said you knew what we’re doing here.’

‘Well, perhaps not *exactly*. . . ’ the Doctor apologised. ‘It was just an informed guess, shall we say?’

‘Forget that,’ said Jode. ‘We want to know what *you’re* doing here.’

‘Me?’ The Doctor looked genuinely surprised. ‘I’m just passing through.

What you’re doing here is far more interesting: have you lost something from the future? That’s temporal-imaging equipment, isn’t it?’

The Doctor made to move towards Fatboy, who was busy recalibrating his scanner while all this went on.

‘That’s enough!’ Jode raised the neuro-stunner again. A faint crackling noise indicated that it was fully powered and ready to discharge.

The Doctor looked at it sourly. ‘What, head-kicking time again so soon?’

‘I’m so very sorry about having to call you,’ said Ernest Fordyke. ‘I wasn’t sure what else to do.’

He was standing on the steps of the church, hands clasped in front of him.

He looked pale and drawn, clearly shocked. And no wonder: the verger’s body still lay half on the path through the graveyard, covered now by a blanket. At least that hid the grotesque marks of the wasp stings that covered the man’s face and neck. Squire Pink let out a long breath of resignation. ‘It’s all right, Vicar. You did the right thing. I’d like to say I’ve never seen anything like it, but I have – and only this morning.’

Very briefly, Squire Pink recounted the tragic news concerning Tom Carlton. Fordyke looked utterly bewildered. ‘I administered the last rites to Mr Williams,’ he told the Squire quietly, ‘but I regret that it was probably too late.

I stood here and watched it. . . happen.’

‘Don’t blame yourself, Vicar. There was nothing you could have done.’

‘Poor man. He lived alone, you know. He had a sister, I think, in Salisbury –

but she died only last year. He was devastated.’

69

‘I’m sure Mr Williams’ work at St Cuthbert’s was a great comfort to him, Vicar.’

‘I’d like to hope so. But for him to die like this. . . ’ Fordyke scowled at the memory of his verger’s final agonies. ‘It’s bizarre. . . ’

‘It’s scandalous!’ declared a sharp voice from behind him. They turned to find Miss Havers emerging from the shadows of the church. ‘Absolutely scandalous!’

Squire Pink suppressed a look of exasperation and instead smiled

thinly at her. 'Miss Havers. This must have been deeply shocking for you. Are you now feeling a little recovered?'

'Fully recovered, thank you,' she replied instantly. She glanced at Fordyke, as if apologising. 'I saw action in the Great War, Squire Pink. It takes more than a sticky end to upset me.'

'I'm sure,' said the Squire.

'Even so, Miss Havers,' said Fordyke, 'you have suffered some distress. Are you sure you wouldn't like to –'

'No, thank you very much. I'm perfectly all right now.'

Fordyke exchanged a long-suffering look with the Squire. 'Well, if you're certain. . . '

'I am. I'm more concerned with poor Mr Williams here than with myself, Vicar. It's scandalous! First gypsies in Marpling, and now this!'

'Gypsies?' echoed Squire Pink.

'Your younger brother met them on the village green this morning,' Miss Havers recounted disapprovingly. 'He was quite, quite rude to me.'

'Well, yes.' Pink coughed, not wanting to have to apologise for Hilary yet again. 'I'll, erm, have a word with him, rest assured. But I'm a little more concerned with these incidents with the wasps, Miss Havers, than with gypsies. . . '

'Should we contact the police?' suggested Fordyke.

'The police!' squawked Miss Havers in horror.

Fatboy ran the temporal-imaging scanner over the Doctor's body. It didn't even bleep once. 'He's clean.'

'You're so kind,' commented the Doctor, sitting very still because of the neuro-stunner held against the side of his head by Jode. Old-fashioned or not, Kala guessed the Doctor knew enough about such weapons to realise that a discharge at point-blank range into his skull would probably cause permanent synaptic damage.

Nevertheless, Kala was quickly learning that it was impossible to predict the man's actions. He had now deftly relieved Fatboy of the scanner and was already examining it closely. For a second Jode was

too surprised to even pull 70

the neuro-stunner's trigger. But by then Doctor had already sat forward so that any discharge from the stunner would possibly encompass Kala, too.

'As I thought,' the Doctor was muttering. 'You've been trying to track an anachronistic element lost hereabouts. This is just the kind of thing you'd need to trace rogue chronon displacement. Nice bit of kit, but I bet it went haywire when it found the TARDIS.' He tossed the scanner back to Fatboy, who caught it easily without comment. The Doctor regarded him curiously for a long moment before turning back to Kala.

'I assume you're the brains of this outfit,' he told her, with only the slightest sideways glance at Jode, 'so you'll recognise a decent offer of help when you hear one.'

Kala arched an eyebrow. She had to admire his nerve.

'If you tell me exactly what you're looking for,' the Doctor continued, 'I might be able to point you in the right direction.'

Kala actually felt herself smiling at his impudence. 'I can't do that.'

'Can't? Or just won't?' He looked at her hopefully with those bright-blue eyes. 'Not even a clue? Just a small one. Cryptic, if you like. Or an anagram!'

'Shut up!' yelled Jode. 'You know where the device is! Tell us!'

'You haven't said the magic word,' said the Doctor.

Jode looked as though a couple of very short magic words were on the tip of his tongue, but Kala interceded: 'Quiet, both of you! Can't you see he's stalling, fishing for information?'

Jode opened his mouth to reply but suddenly the temporal-imaging scanner in Fatboy's hand banged loudly. He dropped the device hurriedly as it fizzed and spat sparks all over the clearing. Something must have caused the chip in Fatboy's SNS suit to short as well, because he suddenly turned from wearing a disruptive foliage pattern to a plain grey coverall. Then the control unit on his wrist sparked and suddenly the SNS material was a kaleidoscope of colour; Fatboy jumped around the clearing like a human rainbow, slapping at the controls until the camouflage-circuit overloaded and the suit turned

grey again.

Jode scooped up the fallen scanner and switched it off with an angry hiss as he burned his fingers.

Fatboy snatched it back. ‘The Doctor sabotaged it!’

Kala turned angrily to the Doctor – but he was gone.

All that remained were the handcuffs lying on the ground where he’d been sitting a moment ago.

‘Well, I’ll be –’ exploded Jode, looking quickly around him in almost comical bewilderment.

Kala just laughed.

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Chapter Twelve

At Gwen Carlton’s house, Anji was thinking about going outside for some fresh air when Hilary Pink emerged from the kitchen. He was looking miserable.

Anji got up quickly. ‘How is she?’ she heard herself ask, and cringed. What a stupid question! She still had sharp memories of her own after losing Dave.

But bereavement counselling had never seemed a very useful skill on the stock market – unless you counted losing several million pounds sterling in one morning as a bereavement. But you could possibly win that back the next day

– there were no second chances with death.

Hilary shrugged; Anji took that to mean awful. She heartily wished she was somewhere else, but then so probably did Hilary.

Anji considered suggesting that they might call a doctor for Gwen, but then bit it back. She found to her dismay that she was completely unable to think of anything useful to say at all.

She was saved the trouble as they both heard a car engine – the distinctive growl of Hilary Pink’s own Bentley pulling up outside. Anji rushed to the window and saw it sighing to a halt on the driveway. She then watched Fitz, who was in the driver’s seat, inexpertly stall it.

Curiously, there were only Liam Jarro and Fitz in the car.

She opened the front door for them. 'Where's the Doctor?'

'We've, um, lost him,' said Fitz breathlessly.

'Lost him?' Anji's eyes hardened as she glanced from Fitz to Liam. 'Where?'

What happened? How?'

Liam pushed past her and ran into the kitchen, where he could see his mother sitting at the table, a handkerchief pressed to her eyes and a cold cup of tea in front of her. Only then did Anji realise that the boy appeared to have been crying. She watched him put his arm around his mother's shoulders. She looked up at her son with red and puffy eyes. Then she flung her arms around him and hugged him, burying her head in his shoulder. A loud sob escaped into the living room, and Hilary Pink quietly shut the door. He caught Anji's eye and gave her a slight smile.

Anji turned back to Fitz, confused. 'What's up? What's going on?'

Fitz was looking edgy. 'Well, we went around to this Rigby guy's place, and he ended up pulling a gun on us and -'

'A *gun*?'

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'It's a long story. I think the kid got a bit of a fright, that's all. This Rigby guy - he's got a real problem. . . '

'And the Doctor?'

'We, er, had to leave him there. He *told* us to go without him. Honestly!'

Liam wiped a hand down his face with a sniff. 'I'm sorry,' he said, pushing himself away from his mother. She looked up at him in confusion.

'Liam, don't. . . ' she began, but then seemed to see something in his eyes -

a strange kind of fear that she obviously couldn't fathom. 'What's wrong?'

‘N-nothing,’ he lied. ‘I’m going to my room.’

He left her then, his stomach clenching inside as he heard her sob. He ran up the stairs and shut his bedroom door so that he couldn’t hear it any longer.

What was happening? His whole world felt turned upside down. First Carlton dying – or being killed. Then that miserable toad Hilary Pink turning up on the doorstep again. And finally that strange Doctor and his friends. . .

But worst of all, what had happened to Mr Rigby?

Liam was trembling and had to force himself to calm down, to be brave, as his father had been. He couldn’t act like a little boy any longer. He had to be a man – be strong and unafraid. If only for his mother’s sake.

He watched an insect crawl across the bedroom window, and, with a start, realised it was a wasp. Thankfully it was on the outside and the window was firmly shut. After a second the wasp just flew away.

But Liam felt himself starting to tremble again.

A little later, the front door opened and Squire Pink strode in. His face was flushed and perspiring. The Squire looked severely at all of them and said,

‘I’ve just had to stop by at St Cuthbert’s. The verger’s been killed – by a swarm of wasps. Just like Tom Carlton.’

‘Another one?’ said Anji. ‘What’s happening?’

Pink squared his shoulders. ‘It’s obvious, my dear: it looks as though there’s a swarm of killer wasps loose in Marpling.’

‘I’m afraid it’s much more serious than that,’ said the Doctor. He swept dramatically into the middle of the room, surprising everyone, including the Squire.

Everybody spoke at once, but Fitz’s voice, full of relief, was loudest: ‘Doctor!

What happened to you?’

‘I was knocked out and interrogated by a temporal hit squad from the far future,’ the Doctor replied.

‘Ask a silly question,’ muttered Anji.

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The Doctor ignored her. ‘The point is, I’m now convinced that the answer to all this lies with Charles Rigby – or more specifically with the mysterious device young Liam saw in his shed yesterday evening.’

‘I’m confused,’ said Anji. ‘Have I missed something?’

‘I’ll explain later,’ said Fitz smugly.

‘Fitz,’ said the Doctor sharply, ‘have you still got that fragment we found in the shed?’

‘Me?’

‘I slipped it into your jacket pocket in Rigby’s kitchen, just before you left.’

‘No wonder you were so keen for us to go!’ Fitz realised, feeling deflated.

‘You were worried about the flipping fragment, not me!’ He rummaged in his jacket pocket and took out what looked to Anji like a piece of black glass.

‘Can’t be too careful.’ The Doctor smiled, taking the fragment. ‘Thanks.’

‘What is it?’ asked Anji.

The Doctor was rubbing the fragment between finger and thumb, a frown on his forehead. ‘That’s what I want to know. If only that temporal hit squad from the far future had been more forthcoming. . .’ He stared pointedly at Anji as he spoke.

‘You mean you weren’t joking? A temporal hit squad? What do you mean?’

‘Yeah!’ said Fitz. ‘Fill us in, Doctor.’

This time Fitz received the pointed stare. ‘Never mind about that now. Suffice to say for the moment that, whatever happens next, we have to get hold of the rest of whatever it was *this* came from.’ He tossed the black fragment into the air and caught it with a blindingly fast snatch. When he spread his fingers the thing had disappeared.

‘Codswallop,’ said Squire Pink. ‘It’s just a swarm of wasps, I tell you. Season for ’em.’

‘It’s not *just* wasps at all,’ retorted the Doctor angrily. ‘It’s what they’re doing

– or trying to do – that concerns me.’

Somewhat taken aback by the force of the contradiction, Squire Pink nevertheless refused to allow a challenge to his natural authority. ‘Either way, I’m going to alert the police in Penton this afternoon,’ he said gruffly.

‘I feel safer already,’ said Anji dryly, earning a reproving look from the Squire, but, she was pleased to note, a smile of encouragement from his brother.

There was nothing more they could do for Mrs Carlton at that point. Squire Pink offered to stay with her for the time being, obviously distrusting Hilary.

There were, he said, evidently some arrangements to be made. Hilary could take his friends back to the Pink House.

75

‘What’s up with him?’ Anji wanted to know as they climbed into the Bentley.

‘First it’s tea and scones at the Grange, and now what?’

The Doctor had automatically slipped into the driver’s seat again. ‘He’s frightened, Anji. He’s just reacting against the unfamiliar – us.’

Anji thought she could sympathise with that: it wasn’t all that long ago since she had found herself first confronted by the *unfamiliar*.

‘I might have known it,’ said a shrill voice from nearby. Miss Havers wheeled into view on her bicycle, pulling up right in front of the Bentley and fixing its various occupants with a hard stare. Anji supposed that in a small village like Marpling people would live in each other’s pockets a good deal, but she instantly resented the old woman’s intrusion anyway.

‘Mr Carlton’s not been dead a day,’ Miss Havers continued remorselessly, aiming her remark squarely at Hilary Pink, ‘and you’re

already sniffing around his poor widow!’

‘That’s uncalled for!’ declared Anji hotly.

Miss Havers regarded her icily for a long moment. ‘Kindly don’t speak unless you’re spoken to, young lady.’

‘Oh, go back to your belfry, you silly old bat,’ said Hilary.

Miss Havers refused to back down. ‘I’ll see your brother about this!’

‘Be my guest – he’s in there.’ Hilary jerked a thumb back at Gwen Carlton’s house.

‘Doing some good, no doubt,’ said Miss Havers, ‘like the honest and upstanding man he is! Unlike you, Hilary Pink, swanning around in a fancy motorcar with your gypsy friends.’

‘I think we’ve heard quite enough from you, Miss Havers,’ said the Doctor firmly. ‘Now kindly step out of the way or I shall be forced to run you and your bike over.’

Any reply she might have made was drowned in the roar as the Doctor loudly gunned the Bentley’s engine. Miss Havers quickly wheeled her bicycle away from the car’s thundering radiator grille, a look of black fury on her face.

‘You haven’t heard the last of this,’ she called after them as the Bentley drew away.

‘So what now, Doctor?’ Fitz asked on the way back, after the Doctor had filled in the gaps for Anji concerning their visit to Charles Rigby’s house and his own subsequent abduction.

‘The most important thing we can do at this stage is have a nice cup of tea and a think,’ the Doctor had called back over the boom of the twin exhausts.

The Doctor’s think lasted the rest of the afternoon, as it turned out, and took the form of – apparently – a long nap. The not-a-moment-to-lose rush had evaporated as quickly as it had come, and now he lay full length on Squire 76

Pink’s sofa with his eyes shut and his hands clasped lightly over his stomach.

He hadn’t even bothered to remove his boots.

Anji was now regarding him with a mixture of alarm and scorn. Hilary was slumped in an armchair with a glass of single-malt Scotch and a cigarette.

Fitz had gratefully accepted a cigarette when offered one but, seeing Anji's eyes – darkly beautiful as they were – giving off warning flashes like a bomb about to explode, he had wisely decided to tuck it behind an ear and save it for later. He now sat at the baby grand, slowly picking out a tune Anji barely recognised.

For want of something better to do, Anji made a pot of tea, loudly rattling the china in the hope of jolting the men out of their respective stupors. Eventually she could stand it no longer. When she had finished she slapped the tray down on the coffee table and said, 'Shouldn't we be *doing* something?'

'We are!' claimed the Doctor, sitting up and looking quite refreshed. 'Hilary is drowning his sorrows, Fitz is practising on the piano, and you've made us all a lovely pot of tea. That's very good, by the way, Fitz. "Let It Be", isn't it?'

'Yeah,' said Fitz, brightening. 'Thanks.'

'And what, exactly, were *you* doing?' Anji demanded, directing the full force of her gaze at the Doctor through narrowed eyes.

Oblivious, the Doctor was pouring himself a cup of tea, which he proceeded to down in one long gulp. 'Thinking,' he said at last.

'You were asleep.'

'I wasn't.'

'Oh, you were *so* not thinking, Doctor! Ten minutes ago you were snoring.'

'I never said I couldn't do two things at once, Anji. Lovely tea, by the way.' He poured another cup and took a sip. 'All right, here's the plan: our friends from the future have travelled back in time to try to find some kind of artefact lost in this particular place and period. Although they've got sensitive tracking equipment, they can't pinpoint its exact location. Now I happen to have a fragment of it here, which we found in Charles Rigby's garden shed.'

The Doctor produced the small piece of black material Anji had seen earlier.

He passed it to her so that she could take a closer look. One side of the piece was smooth and black, but the other was sharply fractured – the glossy innards reminding her of the jagged edge of a broken bottle, with strangely organic striations visible in the material. She was surprised to find that the fragment trembled faintly in the palm of her hand.

‘What is it?’ she asked, hurriedly passing it back.

The Doctor stared at it thoughtfully. ‘I’m not sure, Anji. But there’s something about it. . . something I can’t put my finger on exactly. I’ve been thinking very hard about it – trying to sense what it could be, or what it might be a part of.’

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‘Any luck?’ asked Fitz.

‘Not really. Except for one thing.’ The Doctor’s eyes narrowed. ‘It’s not just damaged. It’s hurt. In pain.’

‘You make it sound like it’s alive, or something,’ muttered Anji.

‘Do I?’ The Doctor’s gaze flicked sharply up at her. ‘Perhaps it is, in a way.

Perhaps it’s even intelligent. Not this actual bit – but what it belongs to.’

‘Sorry, but that’s just creepy.’

‘OK,’ said Fitz. ‘So what now?’

‘There’s a direct link between the artefact, Charles Rigby and the wasps in his shed,’ said the Doctor. ‘All the evidence suggests that Rigby himself has the actual artefact. If it’s not in his possession then it’s certainly in his house.’

There was a long pause, full of anticipation. All eyes were on the Doctor as he poured a third cup of tea for himself. ‘It’s obvious that our friends from the future want to recover the artefact for their own purposes. But I want to get to it *first*.’

Anji asked how, precisely, he planned to do that.

The Doctor smiled. ‘Return to Rigby’s house under cover of darkness and steal it, of course.’

Fitz nodded as if this was exactly what he had expected, while Anji simply gaped. ‘Hello! Calling the Doctor! This Rigby person tried to shoot you this afternoon!’

‘No no no. He only *threatened* to shoot me.’

‘So,’ said Anji, folding her arms now as the battle was joined. ‘Going back at night and burgling his house is likely to want to make him carry out his threat, I would say. Personally, I wouldn’t blame him one bit. Are you insane?’

The Doctor seemed to give this serious consideration. ‘Yes, I suppose I must be. I am also very determined.’

‘Deranged, more like!’

The Doctor looked up at her. ‘Does this mean you won’t be coming with me?’

‘I certainly will not!’

‘I’ll have to take Fitz, then.’

Fitz jumped. ‘Wait a sec. Anji’s got a point, Doc. Let’s not be too hasty.’

‘Hasty? We’ve waited all day! Don’t worry, Fitz, it’ll be dark – no one will see a thing.’

For a second Fitz opened his mouth to argue, but then abruptly closed it.

Anji saw something in his eyes then that didn’t exactly surprise her, but nevertheless made her pause: Fitz was looking at the Doctor and in his expression there was a genuine concern for his friend. Anji knew there and then she’d lost the argument. Fitz would go anywhere with the Doctor despite – or perhaps 78

because of – the danger. Not for the first time Anji marvelled at the Doctor’s ability to inspire courage and loyalty where by rights there should be none.

She sighed and sat down in an armchair. To offer to accompany the Doctor herself would now look contrite, and this was more than her pride would allow.

‘That’s settled, then,’ said the Doctor breezily.

Biting back her fury, Anji turned to Hilary. 'What do you think of all this?'

'Sounds perfectly reasonable to me,' replied Hilary in the considered drawl of the slightly inebriated.

'Here,' Anji said. 'I made you a coffee. Black.' She pushed it across the table towards him as though she wished it were poisoned.

And, since no one else had thought to offer, she took the teapot and poured one herself – only to find that it merely deposited a mulch of cold tealeaves into her cup before running out. She looked up to see the Doctor draining the last of his fourth cup.

'Lovely,' he said with relish.

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Chapter Thirteen

They had whiled away the rest of the evening playing cards, at the Doctor's own insistence. He produced a deck from somewhere, and found a game they all knew how to play – even Hilary sobered up enough to prove that he had, apparently, spent a fair amount of his time in casinos.

Despite the Doctor's usually remarkable card-playing skills, however, he proceeded to lose spectacularly. It was not perhaps the most auspicious pre-lude to the night's activities, thought Fitz, especially as Anji had ended up with the biggest pile of matchsticks. This in itself was just about enough to bring her out of the doldrums, until Hilary Pink reminded her of the old adage,

'Lucky in cards, unlucky in love.'

Some time was spent preparing for their mission: the acquisition of electric torches, gloves, even a small jemmy. Fitz asked if he should use a piece of burnt cork to blacken his face. Anji thought that was a good idea, and did it for him. It was only just before he left the Pink House that Fitz caught a glimpse of his reflection in the hallway mirror: a huge black handlebar moustache and wicked eyebrows had been drawn on to his face. He'd hurriedly rubbed it all off to the sound of Hilary's and Anji's titters.

Now the Doctor and Fitz were walking along the dark country lanes towards the village and Charles Rigby's house. It was a cool, cloudless

night. The stars were livid points in the blackness above, with a great, broad stripe of them visible across the sky. Fitz knew this was Earth's view of the Milky Way. He had heard it given other names, but it was the galaxy that contained Earth and its little sun. He had mixed feelings about Earth now; it had ceased to mean home any more. Fitz had lost count of how many stars and planets he had actually visited since joining up with the Doctor, but he recalled that someone had once said there were more stars in the sky than there were grains of sand on every beach on Earth. . . It was a notion that still made him feel giddy. A long time ago, he would never have envisaged himself journeying to the stars, let alone becoming familiar with the prospect.

Blimey, he thought, I'm a citizen of the universe now.

He wondered what the Doctor really thought, coming back to Earth so soon.

Did it feel like home to him? He had spent far longer on the planet than either Fitz or Anji had. Surely, if the Doctor felt at home anywhere, it must be here.

But the Doctor's thoughts were unreadable. He remained, as ever, a mystery, 81

visible in the bright starlight only as a long-haired silhouette, striding along the lane with the slight swagger that Fitz knew so well.

It was silent out here at this time of night. Absolutely no city noises, of course, and very little wind to move the trees. For several minutes all Fitz could hear was the soft, regular scuff of the Doctor's boots. Occasionally the rhythm was punctuated by the mournful hoot of an owl from the nearby woods.

'Have you remembered what you were doing in 1933 yet?' asked Fitz. 'I mean, the last time you were here?'

'Oh, yes,' said the Doctor. 'But I was a long way from *here* – I spent some time sailing the South Seas roundabout now.'

Fitz gaped. 'A sailor? I don't believe it. Go on, give us a jig!'

The Doctor laughed. 'Not likely – but I'll show you my tattoo if you're lucky.'

'*Tattoo?*'

‘Hello,’ said the Doctor suddenly, dropping his voice to a whisper. ‘We’re here!’

They quietly made their way around to the rear of the house. Fitz could feel his heart beating in his chest; it had been a pleasant stroll here, but now the whole thing seemed ludicrously risky. The Doctor caught his eye, flashing him a grin in the darkness. He signalled with one hand that they should try the windows first.

‘Where are your gloves?’ hissed Fitz in alarm.

‘We don’t need gloves,’ said the Doctor quietly. ‘Our fingerprints won’t match any criminal records in this time period. At least, yours won’t.’

‘What about you, then? Don’t tell me you’ve got a criminal record as well as a tattoo!’

‘Well,’ the Doctor replied patiently, ‘I don’t intend to get caught this time.’

‘That’s what every burglar says,’ Fitz reminded him.

‘I’m not a burglar!’ the Doctor declared, producing his jemmy. He set to work on the nearest window frame, trying to insert one end of the iron between the sill and the sash.

Fitz tapped him on the shoulder. ‘Doctor. The window’s open.’ He flashed his torch quickly over the window, which was, indeed, already open.

‘I told you I wasn’t a burglar,’ said the Doctor ruefully, and tossed the jemmy into the bushes.

Fitz took a deep breath. ‘Right. Come on, then. Let’s have you.’ He formed a stirrup with his hands for the Doctor’s boot and then heaved, grunting with the effort of propelling his friend up and through the open window. The Doctor disappeared, silent as a cat despite his protestations.

After a short pause, the Doctor’s light flashed from within the kitchen to signal the all clear. He slid the window open a little further and helped Fitz in, 82

who fervently wished that he could duplicate the Doctor’s uncannily soundless entry.

A moment later they were both standing in Charles Rigby's kitchen again, every nerve stretched taut in the stillness. It took only a matter of seconds to sweep the torch beams around the kitchen and establish that it was empty.

'Doctor,' Fitz whispered, 'how exactly do you intend to find this thing? I mean, even if it is in the house, it could be anywhere.'

'I suspect it won't be far from Charles Rigby himself,' answered the Doctor in equally hushed tones. 'Find him, and we stand a good chance of finding the artefact.'

Fitz's look of horrified disbelief was lost in the shadows. But his strangled bark of doubt was not.

'*Shh!*' admonished the Doctor sharply. And then again, more quietly: 'Shh.'

'Doctor, I had rather hoped *not* to see Rigby again tonight, if you don't mind.'

'Don't worry,' came the reply, with the kind of casual disregard for obvious terrible danger that Fitz had come to distrust completely. 'There's always this, remember.'

The Doctor was shining his torch into the palm of his other hand, where he held the small black fragment he had found the previous day. In the bright circle of light it glittered like an emerald. 'I've a feeling this will help lead us to the rest of it,' the Doctor whispered.

A clock chimed loudly, announcing to the night in general that it was two o'clock in the morning. When Fitz had recovered from the shock and calmed down, he found that the Doctor had disappeared. He eventually caught a glimpse of his black velvet coat in the hallway and hurried to catch up.

Fitz gradually became aware of a familiar odour – the acidic smell he remembered from his last visit to Rigby's house. It made him feel uncomfortable and nauseous.

'In here,' said the Doctor quietly, indicating a door that led, presumably, to the living room. They crept forward, freezing as a floorboard creaked –

predictably, perhaps – and then pushed the door slowly open.

A black void greeted them.

The Doctor scanned the room with his torch, throwing up a few fleeting impressions: armchairs, table, fireplace, a cabinet full of chinaware. The shadows jumped and loomed mockingly around the walls.

The rank smell was worse in here – much worse, as though there was something poisonous and vile waiting in the shadows.

Fitz gasped when his own torchlight suddenly picked out Charles Rigby's face in the darkness.

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He was standing there in the middle of the room, as still as a statue. Not even the attention of the torchlight caused him to stir. He was, apparently, asleep standing up: his eyes were shut and his mouth was open.

Something small moved in the beam of light, flitting away into the surrounding gloom. With a jolt Fitz realised it was a wasp; and there were more of them flying around Rigby's head, flashing briefly as they passed through the light.

One wasp flew straight into Rigby's open mouth and he didn't even flinch.

Horror-struck, Fitz watched as another wasp joined it. Then he realised that the man's mouth was unnaturally dark in the torchlight; and the darkness was moving.

Gradually he understood. Rigby's mouth was full of wasps. Live wasps.

They were flying in and out of Rigby's head like the wasps infesting the plums in his garden yesterday.

Fitz was unable to tear his gaze away from the sight, although he desperately wanted to. He desperately wanted to scream as well. Wide-eyed, he watched as a wasp crept out of one of Rigby's nostrils, its antennae waving.

Perhaps the most grotesque aspect to this horrific apparition was Rigby's complete immobility. He just stood there, crawling with wasps, utterly oblivious to the presence of the Doctor and Fitz in the room.

The nightmare vision disappeared as the torch beam veered away. Fitz felt the Doctor's cool hand on his, pushing the torch down.

'Oh, God, Doctor. . . ' Fitz whispered hoarsely.

'Ignore them,' ordered the Doctor firmly. 'They're ignoring us, after all.'

'What. . . what are they doing?'

Fitz felt rather than saw the Doctor shrug. 'Living inside him?'

'What for?'

'That's not what we're here to find out. We're after the artefact, remember.'

Fitz tightened his grip on the torch; his hands were sweating profusely in the gloves now. 'Let's get on with it, then, shall we?'

Hilary Pink had returned to his armchair and his bottle of single-malt. Anji's heart sank when she found him slouched there in the semidarkness. The only light in the room was from the two table lamps positioned opposite the fire. The light glittered in the whisky glass as he drank, casting little amber splinters of light across his chin.

'That won't solve anything, you know,' said Anji wearily.

He let her take the bottle and the glass and watched her put them both up on the mantelpiece, out of reach.

'You can't hide inside a bottle,' she added. He said nothing. She sat down on the rug in front of the fireplace and crossed her legs. 'It's Gwen Carlton, 84

isn't it? Seeing her has upset you.'

His head jerked slightly. 'Not as much as it upset *her*.'

'That's only to be expected: she'd just lost her husband. But you and she were close, once, weren't you?'

Hilary sat suddenly upright, his eyes flashing angrily. 'What is this? Some kind of interrogation?'

Anji was taken aback. 'Sorry – I'm just trying to help, that's all. You don't have to tell me anything!'

‘That’s right,’ he said, standing up. ‘I don’t.’

He grabbed his bottle of Scotch again and stormed out of the room, leaving Anji feeling flustered and contrite. As Hilary left, so Squire Pink walked in.

He looked at his brother’s receding back and then at Anji, clearly puzzled. ‘Oh dear. What’s the matter with him?’

‘Sorry. My fault,’ Anji confessed. ‘Pressed the wrong button, I think.’

‘Beg pardon?’

‘Asked the wrong question.’

‘Ah! Not difficult with Hilary, I’m afraid. Don’t worry about it.’

Anji glanced anxiously at the door, wondering if she should go after him.

She really hadn’t meant to upset him. Instead, she said, ‘I was only talking to him about Gwen Carlton. I didn’t realise. . . ’

‘I see.’ The Squire nodded thoughtfully. ‘I think you should know that Hilary and Gwen Carlton were once close friends.’

‘Yes,’ said Anji. ‘I’d gathered that. But I hadn’t really understood *how* close.’

The Squire frowned at this. ‘Close as a man and a woman *can* get, actually.

They. . . got to know each other during the war. Hilary stayed in England because he was a conchie.’

‘Conchie?’

‘Conscientious objector. He wasn’t sent to prison, though, largely because of my intervention. Hilary never really forgave me for that, fool that he is.

But there we are. He stayed in Marpling while Gwen’s husband, John Jarrow, was away fighting for his king and country.’

There was a hint of bitterness in his voice, but Anji didn’t comment; she had the distinct feeling that Squire Pink cared a great deal more for his little brother than he liked to admit. She sat perfectly still, and

waited for him to continue.

‘Hilary was a real curse for Gwen,’ Pink said, staring deep into the unlit blackness of the fire grate. ‘Took her years to shake off the gossip about her dalliance with a conchie. Hilary was hated! Now, he’s just tolerated – a drunk and a lounge lizard and, of course, a coward.’

Anji sat in the silence that followed, considering. It must have taken a particular kind of courage to refuse to go and fight in those days, she supposed.

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She couldn’t conceive of Hilary as a coward. No one who finds sufficient strength in their convictions to risk jail could be a coward. Could they?

‘John Jarrow was killed in the Somme in 1917. Gwen was devastated. Hilary left – typically – and travelled the world. The United States and South America, mainly, to get right away from Europe, I suppose. Left a trail of social destruction behind him, naturally: bar-room brawls, women, scandal. But eventually he came back here – he always does.’ He paused, as if considering his next words carefully. ‘And then he found out that Gwen Jarrow had had a baby.’

Liam Jarrow. But the connection with Hilary Pink was made in Anji’s brain instantly. She looked sharply at the Squire for some kind of clue – a tiny nod, perhaps, or an embarrassed smile, just to confirm her sudden theory – but all she got was a blank look. The Squire’s eyes were still fixed on the past.

‘Liam had been born on Armistice Day. But Hilary had been away for over fifteen years by this point, so the boy was pretty well grown up when he first saw him. Gwen didn’t want to know Hilary then, which is hardly surprising.

He’d lost his chance, as always. She’d already met and married the American chap, Carlton. Good man, by all accounts – but no father to Liam.’ Here Squire Pink had to clear his throat, wary, perhaps, of the emotional content of his story. ‘And there lies the greatest irony of all. Liam thinks John Jarrow was his father, and idolises his memory. And so, of course, Liam despises *Hilary* even more than his American stepfather, because Hilary was a conchie and a coward.’

Anji didn’t know what to say. The whole tale was somehow made all the more pathetic by the fact that Hilary had refused to tell it.

‘So, there you are,’ said Squire Pink gruffly, as if to cover any possible embarrassment. ‘Probably talking out of turn, but. . .’

‘No, not at all. Thank you.’

Pink considered her for a long moment. ‘You’re a strange one, Miss Kapoor, if you don’t mind my saying. But that’s only to be expected with Hilary’s friends. Normally I wouldn’t care, but. . . well, Hilary has been hurt a great deal, despite his faults – of which there are many – and that’s why he’s a little touchy about certain subjects.’

‘It’s all right, really. . .’

‘Oh, don’t worry about him flouncing out like that. Does it all the time, silly fool. Artistic temperament.’

‘Is he artistic?’

‘No,’ said Pink levelly, ‘he just has the temperament.’

She laughed, and he rewarded her with a tight smile and a wink.

‘He’ll be back down soon enough, don’t worry,’ he added. ‘In the meantime, I propose to retire for the night myself – although I’m loath to leave you on 86

your own. Where are the Doctor and, er, Fitz?’

Anji opened her mouth to reply and found that she couldn’t think of anything to say. The Squire had returned quite late, and had obviously not been privy to the Doctor’s plan. It had been taken as read that the Squire would disapprove. She could have said anything to him now, but to lie after he had been so forthcoming about Hilary seemed wrong, somehow. Instead, Anji stood before him gaping like a fish.

‘Well?’ said Pink.

‘It’s here,’ said the Doctor’s voice in the darkness. His torchlight fell on some kind of box like a small crate. The torchlight was reflected back up to cast an eerie glow over his features.

Fitz almost collapsed with relief. His flesh had been itching all over for the last ten minutes, the thought of all those wasps flying in and out of Charles Rigby’s mouth never far from his mind. The stench was making him want to wretch, too. Swallowing the urge down, he turned his own torch on the subject of the Doctor’s exclamation.

‘Are you sure?’

The Doctor’s ghostly head nodded. ‘The fragment’s tingling like mad. It knows.’

‘Great,’ whispered Fitz, willing the Doctor to hurry it up.

‘The box is metal,’ the Doctor was saying. He seemed completely oblivious to the horror standing only a few feet behind them, still, Fitz hoped, motionless as a statue. Or a corpse.

‘So?’ Fitz prompted impatiently.

The Doctor unlatched a clasp on the front of the box. ‘That’s what’s prevented our friends from the future tracking it. The metal probably interferes with the temporal-imaging scans.’

He opened the lid. Inside, clearly visible in the light of Fitz’s torch, was a dull black rod about a foot long. It looked pretty innocuous, but one end was broken – a clear match for the Doctor’s fragment. And, audible now that the box was open, the thing was emitting a distinct, galvanic hum.

The Doctor reached inside the box and took the artefact out. ‘Just call me Raffles,’ he grinned at Fitz.

Behind them, Charles Rigby’s eyes snapped open.

In the darkness, they

seemed to glow faintly with some inner light.

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Chapter Fourteen

‘You say the Doctor’s gone *where?*’ spluttered Squire Pink. ‘To do *what?*’

‘What’s going on?’ Hilary Pink emerged looking somewhat the worse for wear. His eyes were tired and red, his chin blue with an early-morning beard.

‘What’s all the shouting about?’

‘My God,’ thundered the Squire, ‘this time you’ve bally well done it, Hilary!’

What the devil were you thinking of – bringing thieves into my house?’

‘They’re not thieves!’ Anji shouted.

Pink rounded on her, puffing like an angry bull. ‘Course they are. As it happens, miss, I don’t wish to include you in their company – although what a gal like you is doing with the likes of them, I can’t begin to guess. But I won’t have burglars living in my house. You can stay the rest of the night, Miss Kapoor, but be gone first thing in the morning, d’you hear?’

‘But. . . ’ Anji was utterly shocked. She looked to Hilary for some support.

‘Tell him!’ she ordered.

‘Don’t speak a word,’ barked the Squire.

Hilary glanced from one to the other. ‘What’s going on?’

‘Your two friends have gone to Charles Rigby’s house with the express intention of stealing an item in his possession,’ explained the Squire loudly. ‘And that, in my book, is burglary! Breaking and entering! How could you let this happen, Hilary?’

‘You don’t understand. . . ’

‘I understand only too well. I should have known better than to trust your judgement. Miss Havers was quite right – gypsies and thieves! And I can’t afford to be seen harbouring either in this house.’

‘You stupid, pompous old fool!’ yelled Hilary. ‘The Doctor’s not a gypsy or a thief.’

‘What is he then, eh? What d’you know about him? Doctor who?’ The Squire harrumphed. ‘That’s if he even *is* a doctor. All that business with the wasps!’

Hilary made to reply but had to give up when he found he had no satisfactory answers. He looked to Anji instead, but she was, as ever, more concerned with the practicalities of the situation. She had already seen the Squire heading for the telephone.

‘What are you doing?’ she demanded.

‘Calling the police, of course,’ replied Pink as he picked up the receiver.

‘What I should have done much earlier.’

‘You can’t!’

‘I most certainly can. D’you think I’m going to stand by and let an innocent man be burgled? Operator! Put me through to the police in Penton, please.’

Anji looked at Hilary. ‘Do something!’

‘Yes,’ the Squire was saying, ‘George Pink here, in Marpling. I’d like to report an attempted burglary, please. In fact I have reason to believe that it is still currently under way. . . ’

‘Oh, come on!’ Hilary shouted, grabbing Anji by the hand. ‘We’ve got to warn them!’

Anji allowed herself to be dragged out of the room. ‘How?’

If we’re quick we can be at Rigby’s place before the local police.’ Hilary’s previously dazed expression had suddenly been replaced by a wolfish grin of devilment. ‘Now move!’

‘Leave that alone!’

Fitz nearly dropped dead with fright at the sound of the voice – a low, guttural snarl from behind them that could only have belonged to Charles Rigby.

He and the Doctor whirled around, their torch beams flashing across the room to converge on Rigby’s face. His eyes were wide open now, red-rimmed and burning with murderous anger. The wasps were crawling all over his head and shoulders.

‘Put. . . that. . . down!’ Rigby ordered in a choking buzz, as though he was speaking through a throatful of wasps. Which he was.

‘What, this?’ asked the Doctor, waving the artefact loosely in the air. ‘Why?’

‘Put. . . it. . . back. . . ’ growled Rigby.

‘What is it?’ enquired the Doctor.

Rigby took a step towards them. The air seemed to be full of wasps, but it was hard to tell in the gloom.

‘You don’t know, do you?’ said the Doctor, taking a step backwards. He still held the strange black object in one hand. ‘How very interesting.’

Rigby’s mouth opened and Fitz practically balked as a number of wasps crawled or flew inside. How many could there be in there? They must be going all the way down. . . Fitz clamped a hand over his own mouth and nose as his stomach turned.

‘Because,’ the Doctor continued calmly, ‘if I only knew what this thing *was* exactly, I might be able to help you.’ Rigby appeared to stop in his tracks.

‘You’d like that, wouldn’t you?’ said the Doctor gently. ‘I can help you. *If* I can find out what this is.’ He held up the artefact. ‘It’s important to you, isn’t it?’

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‘Give. . . it. . . to me. . . ’

‘Say please.’

‘Doctor,’ hissed Fitz warningly. He was fully expecting Rigby to produce his revolver again and shoot them dead. At least, that was what he fervently hoped. Anything but the wasps.

‘All I want to do is take it away for study,’ the Doctor told Rigby. He held the object aloft, and Rigby’s mad-bright eyes never left it. ‘Not for very long. Just an hour or so. May I?’

Rigby seemed to be struggling to speak now, which Fitz thought was entirely understandable. Nearly all the wasps, as far as he could tell, had now been consumed. ‘Give me. . . the. . . ’ he choked.

‘The what?’ prompted the Doctor, his voice suddenly dropping to a desperate hiss. ‘*What is it?*’

Rigby’s mouth and jaw worked in a hideous parody of speech. I. . . don’t. . . ’

he gasped. Then, more forcefully, ‘Give me it!’

He lunged forward, and the Doctor stepped quickly out of reach, still

holding the artefact.

Fitz, dry-mouthed with fear, started looking around for something to use as a weapon. If the Doctor was intent on provoking Rigby into attacking him, then he wanted something to hit back with. But it wasn't easy: the living room was in darkness and Fitz's torchlight was jumping about in frantic haste.

The Doctor continued to back slowly away from Rigby. His own torch beam fixed squarely on the man's repulsive face. As he glanced across, Fitz felt sure he could see the flesh of Rigby's throat bulging and writhing.

'There's no need for all this,' the Doctor was saying. He was holding the artefact in front of him now like a priest using a crucifix to defend himself against a vampire. 'I want to help you, do you understand? Help you. You need help, don't you?'

Rigby snarled something in reply.

'Was that a yes or a no?' asked the Doctor, stumbling backwards over the corner of a coffee table, but just about managing to stay on his feet.

Fitz suddenly heard something that made him feel faint with joy: the sound of a car engine outside. Some kind of vehicle pulling up at speed!

But the Doctor and Rigby seemed oblivious. Rigby had the Doctor backed up against a credenza. He reached out and grasped the artefact. For a moment the two men stood frozen in the light of the Doctor's torch, each gripping the artefact in one hand. For a horrible second Fitz thought they were going to start fighting over it like a pair of toddlers with a toy.

The Doctor fixed Rigby with a steely glare. 'Let me help you!'

Rigby's mouth opened to reveal a mass of angry wasps.

'I can help you!' yelled the Doctor. 'Give me the device!'

Rigby's free hand swept aside the torch and half the room was plunged into darkness. Fitz gave up on his search for a weapon, having found only a small stem vase with which he would have been

hard-pressed to stun a mouse. Then he suddenly realised that he was holding a pretty good weapon in his hand already: the damned torch. He prepared to rush Rigby from behind, raising the torch to administer as hard a blow as he could on the back of his head. But this sent the beam flashing across the ceiling, and halfway across the darkened room Fitz felt his shins strike the coffee table. He crashed heavily on to the carpet and the torch bounced out of his hand.

In the darkness, Rigby's free hand clamped around the Doctor's throat and squeezed.

The door crashed open and the room was flooded with light from the hallway outside. From his position on the floor, Fitz could see the Doctor and Rigby still struggling over the artefact. Then someone switched on the living room's light and Rigby twisted around, hissing like a venomous snake.

Fitz followed his gaze: standing in the doorway was Anji, and behind her Hilary Pink.

Anji and Hilary had raced to Charles Rigby's house, Hilary hurling the Bentley along the dark lanes with drunken bravado. He seemed to have come alive with the chance to confound not only his brother, but the authorities as well, and displayed a kind of schoolboyish excitement. 'Don't worry,' he'd told her with a grin, 'we'll have the Doctor and Fitz out of there before the local coppers have even pulled their boots on.'

After what seemed an age, Rigby's house had loomed out of the night as the car's powerful headlights fell upon it. But as Anji scrambled out of the Bentley she could hear the sounds of a struggle from within the house. She had led Hilary inside at a run.

'What's going on?' Anji demanded, at first believing that Charles Rigby had simply discovered the Doctor and, well, not exactly *mistaken* him for an intruder but. . . Then she realised that something was terribly, frightfully wrong.

The man had the Doctor pinned against some sort of cabinet, one hand around his throat, the fingers digging deep into his flesh with deadly intent.

Fitz was sprawled uselessly on the floor in the middle of the room.

'All right,' said Hilary Pink loudly as he stepped into the room behind Anji,

‘break it up!’

Hilary clamped a hand on Rigby’s shoulder, but Rigby lashed out with a wild backhander that sent him reeling. The Doctor took the opportunity to lift his foot and shove Rigby back with all his strength. The glass front of the credenza he was leaning against cracked with the force of the kick.

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Rigby crashed into Hilary, and the two men wrestled for moment before Rigby’s hands managed to grasp the other man’s skull. Slowly Hilary’s head was forced back. Rigby, trembling violently and emitting fearsome snarls, bent down towards him.

Then he opened his mouth and vomited a stream of wasps over Hilary’s face.

Anji cried out as Hilary collapsed, tearing at his face and screaming.

Rigby pushed past Anji, bowling her over as he scrambled for the exit.

Hilary’s screams were becoming worse – choking coughs and barks of pain as he crawled across the room, still slashing at his own face with his hands.

Wasps flew all around his head.

The Doctor stumbled over to him, grabbed him by the shoulders. The wasps covered Hilary’s face, filling his mouth and nostrils as he howled and gagged.

He began to shake uncontrollably, his whole body racked by spasms of agony. His eyes snapped open, full of wild terror, looking straight up at the Doctor.

‘What can we do?’ shrieked Anji.

‘Kill him!’ yelled the Doctor, desperately trying to hold Hilary down. ‘Kill him now, before it’s too late!’

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Chapter Fifteen

Anji and Fitz simply stared at him.

Gritting his teeth, the Doctor took a firm hold of Hilary Pink's wasp-covered head and, for a terrible moment, Anji was convinced he was about to snap the man's neck.

But then Hilary appeared to convulse violently, twisting right out of the Doctor's grip. He crawled on his hands and knees towards Anji, his eyes staring redly through a mask of frenzied wasps. For a heart-stopping instant Anji saw the massive, crazed pain in those eyes as he looked up at her. She felt totally paralysed before his piercing gaze. Amazingly, he seemed to be trying to say something, the words no more than agonised gasps as wasps swarmed into his open mouth. 'Don't. . . tell. . . Liam!'

Desperately she wanted to reach out to him, to touch him and offer comfort.

But she was unable to provide it. She simply couldn't move. She stood before him, immobile, locked away in her own automatic revulsion. The distance between them was horrible.

Hilary opened his mouth again, but if he wanted to try to tell her anything else it was lost in a final bubbling croak. Then his eyes rolled mercifully up into his head and he toppled over at Anji's feet. She watched him quivering as the life left his body and the wasps buzzed angrily. Some started to fly away, and then the rest seemed to detach themselves from his prostrate form like a great cloud and whirl towards the open door. Anji remained rigid as the insects filled the air, hardly even daring to breathe until they had all fled.

Hilary twitched horribly for a few more seconds on the floor and then lay still.

There was silence, except for the noise of a couple of stray wasps banging against the darkened glass of the window, and the faintest gurgle from Hilary's body.

Anji slowly backed away, shaking her head. 'No. Oh, no. . . '

Fitz simply stood and watched in silence, not knowing what to say or do.

The Doctor stepped across the room and knelt down by Hilary's body, carefully feeling for a pulse. 'I'm sorry,' he said to Anji. 'He's gone. . . '

She gave a tiny groan of shock, looking at the Doctor in sheer disbelief. The Doctor gently closed Hilary's eyes and then stood up,

utterly crestfallen.

‘Nobody move,’ said a voice from the doorway.

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The Doctor, Anji and Fitz all turned to see a tall woman in combat fatigues moving into the room, followed by two similarly dressed men.

‘Oh, not you,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘This really isn’t a very good time. . .’

Anji sat down on the arm of the sofa, hugging herself and trembling. Fitz stood and goggled at the new arrival: an athletic-looking redhead with a great figure and a mean look. At once he realised who they were: ‘These your friends from the future, Doctor?’

‘Shut it,’ said a powerful-looking man with shaven hair, instantly covering Fitz with some sort of weapon.

‘You won’t need your stun gun,’ sighed the Doctor wearily. ‘Put it away.’

The woman stepped up to the Doctor. She was the same height, so she was able to return the Doctor’s stare quite easily. ‘We have unfinished business, you and I.’

‘This whole *business* is getting out of hand,’ replied the Doctor. ‘Whatever it is you’ve let loose here, it needs to be stopped, and fast.’

‘Where’s the device?’

The Doctor looked around quickly, as if suddenly forgetting where he had put it. He was moving towards the glass debris in front of the credenza when Fitz said, ‘It’s gone. Rigby ran off with it in all the, er, confusion. Sorry, Doctor.’

The Doctor made an exasperated gesture and then covered his eyes. ‘Oh *no*. No no no!’

The woman turned to one of her comrades, the thinner man with the studious expression. ‘Fatboy, get on to it.’

Fatboy – as ironic a name as Fitz could imagine – immediately checked some sort of hand-held scanning instrument. It beeped and clicked busily as he adjusted the controls.

The Doctor ran his fingers down his face. 'Tell me more about this device of yours,' he told the woman. 'What is it, exactly?'

'I said I can't tell you that. What's your interest in it, anyway?'

'If I knew what it was I might be able to help.'

'Help us?' snorted the heavy with the stun gun. 'That's a joke.'

The Doctor sighed. 'No one seems to want my help any more.'

'Nothing, Kala,' said Fatboy, smacking the scanner in his hand. 'Either the device has been hidden or this thing's malfunctioning again.' He aimed a hostile look at the Doctor.

'I don't know who you think you are,' said the woman, Kala, 'and frankly I'm losing interest rapidly. All I know is that at best you're a meddling interloper and at worst you're a criminal.'

'Story of my life,' muttered the Doctor.

96

'I want you out of this time zone with immediate effect,' the woman continued.

'Stop being so officious,' said the Doctor. 'It doesn't suit you. The situation here is becoming extremely dangerous and your presence is only complicating matters.'

Kala stared back at him. 'That's exactly what I was going to say to *you*.'

They stood and glared at each other for a long moment. Eventually, the stench of Scotch rising from the wasp-riddled pool of vomit Hilary Pink was lying in became too oppressive to ignore. Kala looked down at his body with professional disinterest. 'What happened here?'

'I wish I knew,' confessed the Doctor.

'We're wasting time,' said the heavy with the stun gun.

'All right, Jode,' said Kala impatiently. 'When I want your opinion, I *might* ask for it.'

Fitz was warming to this Kala woman. He'd met too many bullies in his life to mistake the kind of thug Jode represented, and it was

satisfying to see him being held in check so thoroughly by this. . . Well, she was no girl to be honest. Her mouth had a rather thin, determined line to it and there were the beginnings of some lines around her eyes which, he suspected, had little to do with laughter. She must have ten years on me, he realised with a tiny feeling of disappointment. Maybe that was why she was completely ignoring him and concentrating on the Doctor.

‘I think I might have a trace,’ announced Fatboy. His scanner thing was whistling unevenly. ‘If only this was functioning properly. . . ’

‘Here,’ said the Doctor, let me have a look at it.’

Fatboy held the scanner well away. ‘Oh no you don’t.’

‘See if you can get a decent fix,’ Kala ordered.

But then they all heard the unmistakable sound of cars pulling up outside.

Fitz crossed to the window in three long strides and pulled back the curtain.

An expression of disbelief took over his face. ‘Look out – the boys in blue are here!’

Anji groaned loudly. ‘Oh, dammit. I forgot to say. . . ’

‘Forgot what?’ asked the Doctor, confused.

‘Squire Pink called the police. He knew you were coming here to rob –’

‘I don’t believe this,’ snapped the Doctor. ‘It’s going from bad to worse every minute!’

Jode had also taken a look out of the window. He turned back to Kala, his expression grave. ‘He’s right. Some kind of local law enforcement.’

Kala made a tight circular motion in the air with one finger, signalling the others to move out. ‘OK. We can’t afford that kind of compromise. Let’s scram.’

‘We’ll come with you,’ said the Doctor, quickly crossing the room to catch up with Kala.

Jode whirled on him, his chin jutting out defiantly. ‘Stay where you are, creep.’

‘Wait –’ said Kala.

‘We can’t go with *them*,’ Anji told the Doctor. ‘We’ve got to stay!’

‘Anji, it’s the *police*. . .’ said the Doctor, emphasising his words with wide eyes.

She shook her head, not giving him a chance to argue. ‘We can’t leave Hilary.’

The Doctor glanced at the body on the floor, clearly torn. Then he looked back to find that Kala, Jode and Fatboy had already vanished.

Fitz was biting his lip. His instinct too was to scarper, but he knew Anji had a point. It didn’t seem right to leave Hilary Pink like this.

‘Anji,’ said the Doctor, ‘if the police find us here – with him – you know what’ll happen, don’t you?’

‘I’m not leaving him here like this. If you want to run, then go ahead. But I’m staying.’

There was that look in her eyes – a dark fire that brooked no argument.

The kind of ‘and-that’s-final’ attitude that Fitz had found himself crumpling before in his dealings with women the universe over, time and time again.

And, because the Doctor was a man too, he also wilted before such bleak determination.

‘OK, OK,’ he muttered, but it was already too late. The door crashed open and a tall, severe-looking man in a grey raincoat and trilby hat filled the doorway. Behind him were two uniformed bobbies, as thickset and uncompromising as Fitz had ever seen.

The man in the raincoat swept the room with small, practised eyes, taking in every detail and finally settling on the body on the floor.

‘Well,’ he said stonily. ‘What have we here, then?’

Kala’s team regrouped not far from Rigby’s house, their SNS suits providing the perfect camouflage in the depths of the night. The

darkness helped obscure the worst of the intermittent faults in Fatboy's suit; repairs to both his SNS suit and the temporal-imaging scanner had been hurried to say the least.

Jode squatted on his haunches, panting slightly, although the colour in his cheeks was nothing to do with physical exertion. He was furious. 'This whole thing's gone down the pipe,' he spat. 'Let's instigate Plan B.'

'You are joking, I trust,' said Kala.

'Of course I'm not joking,' he said hotly, standing up straight now. 'I'm serious, Kala. We're never going to catch up with the device now. It's too 98

dangerous to leave any longer. If it's been activated –'

'We can't know that for sure.'

'It's only a matter of time! And we can't afford to take the risk.'

Kala shook her head. 'I'm not giving up yet.'

'You're risking everything. Use the bomb!'

'Not yet!'

Jode exhaled deeply 'It's that Doctor guy, isn't it? You can't believe all that garbage about him wanting to help, surely?'

'I don't know what to believe – yet.'

'You want to give him the benefit of the doubt?' Jode sneered derisively.

'He wanted to come with us.'

'Of course he did – to avoid the local cops.'

'That's not the impression I got.'

'He's a rogue element!'

'That's the whole point!' Kala spat back. 'We don't know what he is – or even who he is!'

'We haven't got time to get to know him,' Jode reminded her harshly.

‘Our mission is simple: get the device back quick – emphasis on the *quick* – or sterilise the area. Nothing else.’

‘But what if he *can* help. . . ?’

‘Forget him, Kala! I think you’re losing sight of how important our mission actually is. We’re not here to round up illegal time travellers, and the involvement of local law enforcement completely changes things. Kala, the stakes are too high; let’s use the bomb and get it over with!’

It was without doubt the longest speech Kala had ever heard Jode make.

He was renowned for his bluntness – it was part of the reason why she had chosen him for the mission. She thought about what he had said for long seconds before finally shaking her head. She could be just as stubborn. ‘Not yet. Not while there’s a chance of recovering the device.’

Jode made an impatient noise and stomped away, his boots crunching loudly through the undergrowth. Kala watched him go until his SNS suit rendered him completely invisible, but her mind was elsewhere: she was thinking of the Doctor.

Somehow she knew she hadn’t seen the last of him.

99

Chapter Sixteen

Inspector Roger Gleave sat in the Number Two Interview Room in Penton Police Station and regarded his prisoner with a sour expression.

Gleave was middle-aged, rather worn around the edges and not, generally speaking, a happy man. His demeanour had not been improved by his being called out of bed in the middle of the night to investigate a burglary-in-progress that could easily have been handled by a couple of uniformed constables. The fact that he had been asked for personally by none other than George Pink didn’t help, either; Pink held some sway with the Magistrate’s Court in Penton and Gleave owed him a favour. He simply hadn’t expected it to be called in at three o’clock in the morning. Now the gentle kiss he had given Mrs Gleave’s forehead as he left her sleeping was a distant memory.

Since then things had gone steadily from bad to worse.

Take, for instance, his chief suspect – the man sitting opposite him across the small interview desk with his arms folded and a superior attitude. His hair was long enough to reach his shoulders. He wore an elaborately old-fashioned costume. He was not, in any sense, your typical burglar, thought Gleave peevishly.

But the man's clear blue eyes were full of an earnest intelligence that Gleave found impossible to ignore. He actually felt that the man's superior attitude was not simple arrogance but simple fact.

Nevertheless, it was his duty to press on with the interview. Gleave took a few moments to gather his thoughts and then, with barely a glance at the first glimmer of daybreak shining through the narrow windows, said, 'Let me tell you how I see things, Doctor.' He had long since given up trying to get a name out of the suspect; in the end it had proved simpler just to call him by his title.

Later, Gleave would consider that as the Doctor's first victory. 'You and your accomplice –'

'Companion.'

'– broke into Mr Charles Rigby's private residence in Marpling at around two o'clock this morning. Burglary was your intention, but you were discovered by Mr Rigby in the process of the crime and he tried to stop you.'

'You've taken this completely out of context.'

'But I'm right, aren't I?' pressed the inspector. 'That is, essentially, what happened?'

101

The Doctor sighed. 'Yes, but the context is important.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes!' The Doctor ran a hand through his ridiculous tangle of hair. 'I was trying to locate the artefact. . . '

'Ah, yes, now: this artefact.' Gleave consulted his notes. 'You can't tell me exactly what it is – apart from the fact that it is "probably beyond current human understanding" – but that it *was* in the possession of

Mr Rigby.'

'That's right.'

'And *possession* is nine-tenths of the Law, Doctor.'

'Not this kind of possession,' stated the Doctor, leaning forward. 'This is something else entirely. Charles Rigby has been taken over by a swarm of superintelligent wasps and has to be stopped before –'

'Forgive me if I don't believe a word of what you say, Doctor,' interrupted Gleave, 'but I'm not a fool. And neither, I suspect, are you.'

The Doctor sat back, struck by a sudden thought. 'I suppose you think I'm mad, don't you?'

'As a matter of fact, no. I believe you are in full possession of all your faculties.'

'Unlike Charles Rigby.'

'But the fact remains –' Gleave's voice hardened as his patience wore thin –

'that you and your *companions* were found in Rigby's house with the body of a man who appears to have died in very suspicious circumstances.'

'Yes, Hilary Pink.'

'His identity has already been established, thank you,' said Gleave dryly.

But such gentle sarcasm seemed lost on the Doctor. 'Has his brother been informed?'

'It is in hand, Doctor. I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. Your own position is worrying enough to command your full attention.'

'What about my accomplices?'

Gleave managed a tiny smile. Not without some humour after all, then.

'They will remain in police custody, until I've satisfied myself that I've got to the bottom of all this. Starting with you.'

‘But I’ve already told you what happened. Every detail.’

‘The artefact and the wasps, yes. . . ’ Gleave pushed the Doctor’s written statement to one side of the desk as though it could be completely discounted.

‘I can prove it to you,’ insisted the Doctor. ‘Let me examine the body of Hilary Pink.’

‘Really, Doctor, your claims and requests grow more and more preposterous.’

The Doctor banged the flat of his hand on the desk in sudden anger. ‘This is ridiculous! I simply can’t afford to waste any more of my time here, Inspector.

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Why can’t you just let me go?’

‘Out of the question.’

‘What happened to “innocent until proven guilty”?’

‘You’re helping me with my enquiries, Doctor!’

The Doctor gaped. ‘Inspector, all you have to do is establish who or what killed Hilary Pink, and I’ve already given you the answer to that one.’

‘Hmm.’ Gleave nodded without much conviction. ‘A swarm of superintelligent wasps living inside Charles Rigby, I think you said.’

The Doctor ignored him. ‘I need to carry out a full autopsy on Hilary Pink, discover the true nature of the infestation, find a dangerous artefact from the future lost in this time zone, work out its connection with that swarm of superintelligent wasps, and keep one step ahead of a temporal hit squad while I do so. Now ask yourself who should be helping whom.’

Gleave sighed heavily. ‘Let’s go over the facts again.’

‘What, again? This is worse than being stuck in a time loop!’

‘You have to see it from my point of view, Doctor! I’m called out in the middle of the night to attend a suspected burglary. That’s reasonably unusual but not exactly unheard of. I arrived at the scene

of the crime to find the burglars still on the premises in question. So far so good. But now things start to go awry: it's more serious than a burglary now, because there's actually been a murder, and a pretty gruesome one at that. But the murder victim isn't the owner of the house – or even one of the burglars! – no: the dead man is actually the brother of the person who contacted the police to alert them about the robbery in the first place!' Gleave sat back, breathing a little more heavily. 'So, you can see that from *my* position this whole case is nothing but a giant can of worms.'

'Wasps,' said the Doctor.

'Ah, yes. And then there is you, and your somewhat fanciful claims.'

'I have been nothing but co-operative.'

'Doctor, it took me nearly an hour to establish that you do not, allegedly, even have a name, let alone an address.'

'I've told you where I live.'

'Please!' Gleave held up his hand and shut his eyes. 'Let's not go back over the police-call-box business. It's more than I can stand at the moment.'

The Doctor sat back and the two men regarded each other once more.

'All right,' said the Doctor eventually in a calm and reasonable tone. 'Let's return to the facts that you *can* understand. May I ask a question?'

'I'm tempted to say that would be highly irregular, but in the circumstances it appears almost mundane.'

'There have been two other fatalities in Marpling that I know of, both caused by wasps,' the Doctor carried on, holding Gleave's attention with his eyes.

103

'Tom Carlton and the verger at St Cuthbert's. Are you aware of them?'

Gleave sat back. 'Go on,' he said.

'Hilary Pink was also killed by a swarm of wasps.'

'So you say.'

‘I can prove it.’

‘How?’

‘Autopsy.’

‘That is already in hand. I have called in a police pathologist for exactly that purpose. We aren’t so short-staffed in Penton Police that we need to draft in our prime suspects to help investigate their own crimes.’

The Doctor ignored the sarcasm, still fixing the inspector with a solemn gaze. ‘Either way, have your man check the bodies of Tom Carlton and the verger. He’ll find very marked similarities in the cause of death.’

Gleave considered all this carefully. He did know about the other two unfortunate deaths in Marpling. It was a fact that George Pink had reported both to the authorities. Perhaps it was worth looking into. But that only lent weight to the Doctor’s more absurd claims; if he gave credence to one then he instinctively knew that he would end up doing so to all the others, one after the other, just like a row of toppling dominoes.

Somewhere in the distance church bells signalled that it was six o’clock in the morning. Gleave felt enormously tired and in need of a hot drink.

‘Tea, please,’ said the Doctor abruptly.

Gleave just regarded him blankly for a moment, and then seemed to reach a decision. ‘Doctor. Some years ago, I was unlucky enough to be the investigating officer in a domestic murder case. An ordinary man, just like you or me in many respects – well, me, at any rate – turned on his wife and two young children and killed them. He had a good job, excellent prospects, and to all intents and purposes a very happy family life. I’ve never understood what could have driven that man to slaughter his loved ones like that. Thankfully he took his own life as well – perhaps the only bit of the whole sorry story I could comprehend. But it all seemed to me to be *incredible* – and I use the word in its literal sense. I said at the time, having witnessed the results of that incredible madness, that I could believe anything after that. So you see, all that you have told me this morning is no more or less incredible than that, in my personal opinion.’

The Doctor said nothing.

‘However,’ continued Gleave resignedly, ‘it’ll take more than my personal opinion to get you out of here. But I’m prepared to look into the matter from, shall we say, a slightly different angle.’

The Doctor’s shoulders visibly relaxed. ‘Thank you,’ he said quietly.

* * *

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‘I’ve never been in a police cell before,’ said Anji. Not on Earth, anyway.’ Her voice was flat and subdued, and it sounded as though she was talking only to stop herself thinking.

They were sitting in a small, bare room with peeling yellow paint on the walls and the only exit blocked by a heavy iron door bolted from the outside.

It smelled of perspiration and disinfectant, with a lingering trace of booze.

Fitz guessed that this particular cell was usually reserved for the drunk-and-disorderlies.

‘You get used to it after a while,’ he said lightly.

Anji continued to stare at the thick, peeling paintwork. Beneath it was some crumbling plaster and old, solid bricks. But Fitz had the impression that Anji was seeing something else entirely. And he had a pretty shrewd idea what.

‘You liked Hilary, didn’t you?’ he prompted.

She nodded. ‘Rogues and mavericks aren’t really my type, but he seemed. . .

I don’t know. A bit lost.’

Fitz said nothing.

Anji covered her eyes with one hand. ‘I can’t get it out of my mind. The way he. . . died.’

‘Try not to think about it,’ said Fitz awkwardly. But long experience had told him that kind of advice was useless.

‘It’s this place,’ said Anji hotly, suddenly standing up. ‘How long are

they going to keep us locked up in here? Isn't there a law against detaining people without charging them?'

'Maybe,' said Fitz, 'but unfortunately we're on the wrong side of it.'

Anji thumped on the iron door with her hand, producing a feeble noise. 'I demand to speak to someone in authority!' she yelled.

'Don't make a fuss,' warned Fitz gently. 'They won't like it.'

She rounded on him angrily, dark eyes narrowed. 'I suppose you think we should just sit here and wait for the Doctor?'

Fitz shifted uncomfortably on his bench. Without actually realising it at the time, that was exactly what he had been thinking.

'You can't rely on him,' said Anji flatly. 'He could've been charged himself by now.'

'With what?'

'I don't know!' Anji's shout reverberated around the cell. Then, more quietly, she said, 'Attempted murder or something.'

Fitz swallowed hard. He knew exactly what she was referring to. 'It wasn't like that.'

'That's what it looked like to me. You heard what he said: he wanted us to kill Hilary.'

'He must have had a good reason.'

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'A good reason?' Anji gasped. 'To *kill* someone? Wake up, Fitz!'

'The wasps –'

Anji covered her face with both hands and lowered her head.

'I'm sorry,' said Fitz. 'But the Doctor wouldn't say something like that lightly.'

He just wouldn't.'

Anji's head remained sunk. Fitz had to admit it sounded almost as if he was trying to convince himself.

Chapter Seventeen

Morning was a special time of day for George Pink. He awoke every morning at six o'clock sharp, and his first task of the day following breakfast was to walk the dogs. It was this part of the day that he enjoyed the most – good physical exercise in the company of two adoring companions, and, above all, a rock-solid routine.

But not today.

Pink had seen the sunrise today, and found it to be a melancholy sight: the clouds were cast with a pink and lilac effulgence he found faintly nauseating.

Of course, it could have been that his perceptions this particular morning had already been coloured.

And that colour was black – the deepest, most pitiless black he could have imagined.

He sat in one of the armchairs – it felt cold – and stared blankly at the coffee table in front of him. It still held the detritus of last night's gathering: an empty teapot, coffee cups, a pack of cards. And of course a bottle of Scotch.

The bottle was only half empty, which meant that Hilary must've been taking it easy last night. Probably in deference to the Kapoor gal, Pink realised.

There had always been more than a touch of the romantic about Hilary. That had been his problem all along. No room for romanticism in the modern world.

Pink's hands gripped the arms of the chair he sat in so tightly that the knuckles were white. His face was a stony mask, devoid of expression. Tight-lipped, he regarded the bottle of Scotch and mentally skirted around the emotions he could feel boiling away in the pit of his stomach.

He was thinking of his childhood – *their* childhood – remembering times and places he had long since thought permanently forgotten. He vividly recalled tying Hilary to the table leg in the kitchen – Hilary must have been about four years old at the time – so that he, George, could go out and play unhindered by a sibling nearly ten years his

junior.

But they did play together. In the woods around Marpling, games of hide-and-seek and catch. French cricket in the summer. Sharing the fun to be had with a steel hoop bought for them both in London by their father. Fighting over it. Hanging it from a tree branch that Hilary couldn't possibly reach, only to give in the moment he burst into tears.

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Childhood games; George's adulthood and encroaching responsibilities

and in particular the Great War – had put paid to all that. Hilary and George had been separated by everything except blood. Now they were separated by something far worse. How typical of this bitter and merciless world that they should be parted following an argument. In some ways it was no more than Pink expected, but two thoughts in particular kept circling in his mind.

First, that he had been responsible in part for sending Hilary to his death. And second. . . that he would never, ever see him again.

Abruptly, Pink rose from the armchair and, with a sniff, picked up the telephone. He dialled the operator and asked to be put through to the police station in Penton.

'Hello?' he said after a short wait. His voice was firm and full of authority.

'Yes, I'd like to speak to Inspector Gleave – immediately.'

The heavy metal door clanked open revealing the little cell beyond. The early-morning sunlight was shining through the tiny window positioned some eight feet off the ground.

The Doctor was resting his head on a pillow made from his velvet frock coat and, at the other end of the bunk, his boots were casually crossed – but this attitude of relaxation was an obvious sham. The cell was filled with an electrical tension, and his eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling. He didn't appear to feel the need to squint in the bright yellow sunshine.

He sat bolt upright, the expression of barely suppressed madness vanishing in an instant. 'Inspector Gleave! How nice to see you again.'

‘Doctor. I’ve some news for you.’

The Doctor bounded to his feet and looked at Gleave expectantly.

‘Hilary Pink’s brother, George, has been on the telephone,’ Gleave advised him. ‘He’s made a statement corroborating your story. At least, the parts referring to the involvement of his brother at Charles Rigby’s house this morning.’

‘Good, good,’ said the Doctor, apparently unsurprised. ‘Any news of Rigby himself?’

‘None.’ The Doctor pursed his lips in thought. ‘Anyway,’ Gleave went on,

‘Mr Pink has arranged with the magistrate’s court for the release of you and your companions on police bail, pending further enquiries. In other words, you’re free to go.’

‘But I don’t want to go!’

‘What?’

‘I said I wanted to examine Hilary Pink’s body, remember?’

Gleave shook his head. ‘The police pathologist will do that.’

‘Then let me help him.’ The Doctor quickly pulled on his black frock coat.

‘Not a chance,’ said Gleave.

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The Doctor looked instantly crestfallen. ‘Can’t I even watch?’

‘Are you always so persistent, Doctor?’

The Doctor grinned and clapped Gleave on the shoulder as though he were an old and valued friend. ‘They say I’m incorrigible,’ he admitted. ‘Now, is that bacon and eggs I can smell?’

Miss Havers arrived at the Pink House at seven o’clock precisely. Squire Pink was surprised to see her, but not in the mood to care much. A part of his brain assumed that she had taken a minor detour on the way to church to stick her nose in where it wasn’t welcome. He knew exactly what it would be about.

'I just wanted to offer my sincere condolences,' she said, sitting astride her bicycle on his doorstep. 'It must be a terrible shock, Squire. . . '

Pink nodded mutely. He didn't really trust himself to speak.

Miss Havers licked her lips and went on: 'Now, I cannot pretend that your brother and I got along, Squire. I know he could be extremely difficult. But I respect the fact that you stuck by him through thick and thin. Family is very important, and I know you to be a gentleman in every respect.'

If only you knew, thought Pink savagely. But he said, simply, 'Thank you.'

Then a curious notion struck him just before he was about to apologise and bid her good day. 'Miss Havers, how could you have possibly known so soon?'

'News gets about very quickly in a village like Marpling, Squire,' she explained. 'Bad news particularly.'

'So it would appear.'

'Talking of which,' she went on swiftly, perhaps recognising the spark of resentment growing in his eyes, 'at least those awful gypsy people are in police custody. I understand that they were trying to burgle Mr Rigby's house. I never did like the look of them – untrustworthy in every respect, that sort. I knew they were trouble from the moment I set eyes on them, of course. I did try to warn your brother only yesterday, may God take mercy on his soul, but I'm afraid he wouldn't listen. . . ' She shook her head sadly to emphasise how sorry she was.

'Quite,' was all Pink felt he could safely say. He eyed her bicycle with the thought of kicking her right off it foremost in his mind. 'But, as a matter of fact, I'd prefer to get my hands on Charles Rigby himself.'

'Mr Rigby? I understood him to be indisposed.'

'It happened in his house, Miss Havers. He must know something.'

'Right,' said Miss Havers decisively, setting her foot to a pedal. 'We'll have to see about that!'

The police car took them all the way from Penton to Marpling, a journey of about ten miles by Fitz's reckoning. He sat with Anji on the long back seat, the 109

shiny leather already warmed by the sun climbing into another bright blue sky.

The car smelled like the cars of Fitz's youth, of metal and wood and leather.

He didn't find it comforting.

Anji looked depressed. The events of the early hours still seemed to be weighing heavily. Fitz couldn't decide whether she was more upset by the Doctor's behaviour or the death of Hilary Pink. She seemed equally furious about both. Fitz opted not to pursue the matter. There was nothing he could do about Hilary, and if Anji had a problem with the Doctor then it was for her to sort out with him. Fitz only hoped the Doctor knew what he was doing, and what he might be letting himself in for.

When they had been told that they could leave, Fitz had immediately assumed it would be with the Doctor. But he had, typically, gone off somewhere with some detective inspector without saying a word. The sergeant had muttered darkly about pathologists and mortuaries, and so Fitz felt some relief that they were not to accompany him, and Anji didn't seem to care. The only problem was where to go – until it transpired that their release had been engineered by Squire Pink. With little other option, Anji and Fitz had accepted a lift back to the Pink House.

They didn't talk much on the way back, but, as the car turned into the road that led past the Pink House, Fitz saw Miss Havers pedalling out of the gates to the grange.

'Hey, look, it's that old bat with the bike again,' he pointed out.

Anji turned and peered through the rear window as the police car pulled into the drive. 'So it is. I wonder what she wanted.'

'Looks like 'is nibs is 'ere to meet you both,' announced the sergeant at the wheel of the car.

Squire Pink was standing on the steps of the entrance to his house. He looked sternly at the police car, his lips turned down and a great frown creasing up his forehead. Fitz felt awkward and not a little afraid: how were they going to speak to him after last night?

Anji had no problem. She launched herself out of the car, eyes flashing as all her pent-up anger overflowed. 'Why did you call them? Why did

you have to call the police last night? You ruined everything!’

Squire Pink sucked in his cheeks and regarded her squarely. ‘May I remind you, Miss Kapoor, that it is entirely because of me that you have now been released from police custody.’ He held her gaze for a moment and then added,

‘And that it is *my* brother who lost his life last night.’

He was clearly rattled, and it was enough to make Anji pause. Pink continued to demonstrate the stiffest upper lip Fitz had ever seen as he continued: ‘I couldn’t possibly have foreseen what happened last night, and given that time over again I daresay I’d do the same thing; but, by God, I know I will never

forgive myself. You’d better come in.’

He turned on his heel and disappeared through the open front door.

Anji looked at Fitz, who shrugged. She shook her head at him and followed Pink inside.

‘Mr Pink,’ said Anji after drawing a deep breath. ‘I just wanted to say: I’m sorry about Hilary. If there was anything I could have done to avoid. . . well, you know.’

‘Yes, I know,’ he conceded gruffly. ‘People think Hilary and I hated each other’s guts, you know. Not true.’ He seemed on the verge of saying something else, but appeared to decide against it. Judging by the way that the muscles in his jaw were so tightly clenched, he didn’t trust himself to speak any further.

At least, not on the subject of his brother.

Obviously the stoic type, thought Fitz, as they followed him through the house. Anji seemed to want to say more, but Fitz caught her eye and gave a minute shake of his head. She frowned a ‘what?’ at him and he quickly mimed zipping his mouth shut to signal that she should drop the matter.

‘Where’s the Doctor?’ asked the Squire eventually when they reached the living room.

‘He’s helping the police with their enquiries,’ Fitz said, only to realise then how that must sound. ‘I mean, really helping them.’

‘Haven’t heard all the details yet,’ boomed the Squire, ‘but I’d dearly like five minutes with that man Rigby.’ His voice now betrayed only the merest hint of annoyance. Stoic wasn’t the word, realised Fitz. The man was displaying a bloody-minded refusal to give in to his emotions.

‘I’m afraid he made himself scarce,’ Fitz said.

‘He’ll be a long way away by now if he has any sense,’ added Anji.

Fitz snorted. ‘Didn’t strike me as having any sense at all. He was – well, you saw what happened, Anj. I can’t imagine him getting very far – he was in a poor way.’

‘Injured?’ queried Pink hopefully.

‘Not exactly.’

‘We need to find him, don’t we?’ said Anji after a moment.

‘Yes,’ agreed Squire Pink. He was looking at Anji, as if trying to weigh something up in his mind. ‘It’s probably best if we can do something practical at a time like this.’

Anji just smiled and nodded.

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Chapter Eighteen

‘He’s on the move,’ said Fatboy. ‘Or at least the device is – and it’s still in the village.’

Kala breathed a sigh of relief and snapped the cap back on her drink tube.

‘Great.’

Jode muttered something beneath his breath, but Kala didn’t even bother to glance at him. She joined Fatboy by the scanner and studied the flashing display. The instrument beeped rapidly and threw up a schematic on its little screen. There was the icon representing the device, flashing in the middle of a computer-generated map of this local settlement. Kala stuck her tongue into her cheek as she considered the implications of the tiny icon’s gradual movement across the map.

‘What’s he playing at?’ she wondered aloud. ‘Why can’t he just leave it alone?’

Fatboy shrugged. ‘Primitive curiosity, I suspect. He can’t know what it is: no one in this time period could identify it, or even guess what it might be.’

Jode said, ‘The longer we leave it, the greater the risk.’

‘I’m aware of the threat potential,’ Kala told him patiently. ‘But it’s not over yet.’

‘The risk factor increases every minute – faster if it’s in the hands of one of the natives.’

‘Natives?’ Kala hated the expression, although it was common among the older agents when referring to the indigenous cultures and populations of early time zones, particularly pre-atomic-age civilisations. ‘Could be one of your great-great ancestors, Jode.’

‘Don’t give me that. I’m not afraid of using the bomb. And, if we don’t get the device back this time, then we *will* have to use it.’ Jode glared at her, trying to force her down.

Kala held his stare. ‘I’ll make that decision,’ she said calmly. More calmly than she felt.

‘Yeah?’ Jode sat forward. ‘There’ll come a point when you can’t avoid it any longer, Kala. I’m just warning you that that point’s not too far away now.’

The Reverend Ernest Fordyke arrived at St Cuthbert’s a little later than usual.

Like most people in the village he was a creature of some habit – he normally 113

smiled at that little joke – but today, in the light of yesterday’s events, he felt as though he never knew what was coming next. He had approached the church following his usual route from the vicarage, via the cemetery. Normally it didn’t bother him, but he experienced a real pang of – what? fear? – as he stepped over the spot on the path where Mr Williams had met his awful end.

He crossed himself and quickly carried on into the church itself.

It was marvellously cool and silent inside. He changed in the vestry, and while he was there he heard someone else coming into the church. When he went to investigate he was a little surprised to find that it was Charles Rigby, the village's resident dentist. The man was sitting in a pew, halfway down the nave.

‘Good morning!’ Fordyke called as cheerily as he could manage. His voice echoed hollowly around the old church.

Rigby didn't appear to have heard him – but then he looked up, suddenly, as if startled. Fordyke had quite a shock: he didn't know Rigby very well

– hardly at all, because the man wasn't a churchgoer – but he did look ill.

His face was sweaty and grey. Fordyke was put in mind of Miss Havers the previous afternoon. Perhaps there was some kind of bug going around.

‘Er, hello,’ Fordyke ventured again. ‘Mr Rigby, isn't it? Thought I, um, recognised you.’

Rigby looked up at him with sore-looking eyes. They were burning red.

Then he looked away, down at the back of the pew in front of him. He was breathing heavily.

As Fordyke approached, he became aware of a disgusting smell: a horrible, chemical reek that made him gag.

Then he saw the wasp crawling along the back of the pew.

Instantly he froze, recalling the terrible fate of the verger.

The wasp crawled along the pew. Rigby raised a hand; at first Fordyke thought he was going to swat it. But then he just laid his hand on the pew next to the insect – and the insect crawled on to his flesh.

Fordyke frowned. Rigby was just asking to be stung by the thing. Bizarre behaviour!

The wasp crawled around Rigby's fingers, over his knuckles and then up his wrist, disappearing beneath the cuff of his shirt.

Only then did he look back up at Fordyke. The clergyman instantly

averted his gaze. He didn't want to make any kind of eye contact. Something was telling him to retreat, to get away from him. He didn't know if it was instinct or the word of God, but Fordyke knew that he had to get away from this man.

His eyes fell on something lying on the pew next to Rigby. Some sort of stick or tubular device, smooth and black. A truncheon? It lacked any kind of marking or handle, and it seemed to be giving off a faint hum, like an electric 114

light bulb in the moments before it fails. As if sensing the vicar's curiosity, Rigby's hand dropped on to the device, covering it protectively.

Fordyke glanced back up to find Rigby glaring at him through red-rimmed eyes.

Kala and her team were closing in on an imposing building made of locally quarried stone; it was pretty ancient even now, the brickwork covered with moss and lichen in places. A stout tower was mounted at one end.

'Church,' said Fatboy quietly, as if quoting from a dictionary. 'Place of primitive worship. It will have great religious significance, probably for one of the better-established belief systems in vogue during this era.'

Kala would have asked which one had she been interested. Instead she asked about the best possible approach route.

Fatboy indicated the stretch of open grassland annexed to the side of the building. There were a number of stone slabs positioned at regular intervals in the grass, with other stones set upright.

'Cemetery,' Fatboy explained. The local dead will be buried in the ground here, in wooden boxes. Each stone marks the position of an interred body.'

Kala pulled a disgusted face.

'Bloody barbaric,' muttered Jode.

'It's the twentieth century,' said Fatboy, 'but they've been burying their dead like this for millennia.'

Kala shook her head in disbelief. The more she heard about this period

the less she wanted to know. 'Let's get on with it,' she said. 'I trust the reading is still stable?'

Fatboy gave the scanner a brief check. 'It's in there all right.'

'OK. I want you to stay out here just in case. If it moves, I want you to lock on and don't lose the trace, understand?'

'Got you.'

'We'll get it this time,' Kala added quietly. 'I promise.'

'And if we don't?' asked Jode.

Kala didn't reply.

'Wait a minute,' said Fatboy suddenly, gesturing to the far side of the graveyard. From here they could see the entrance to the church building. There was a woman there – riding along on some kind of frame mounted on two narrow wheels. She clambered off the thing and rested it against the doorway before striding inside.

'Damn!' hissed Kala.

Ernest Fordyke was immensely relieved to see Miss Havers, although she was a trifle late again. For the second morning running!

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'I'm sorry,' she told him, without actually sounding sorry, 'but I wanted to stop by Squire Pink's, to give him my condolences.'

Fordyke would have followed this up, but he was all of a dither this morning. A part of his brain made him want to ask for more details, but at the moment he was too full of his own, current misgivings. 'I should be offering my apologies, also,' he explained as he wrung his hands in front of her. 'I'm really not myself this morning. That unfortunate business yesterday. . . '

'Really, Vicar, you should pull yourself together,' admonished Miss Havers.

She was smiling but there was a steely glint in her eye. 'You will be no use to anyone in this state.'

'Er, quite,' he replied. He had hoped for a slightly more forgiving response.

Hadn't he tried to comfort her yesterday, after she had had a nasty turn? 'But I have a visitor this morning,' he continued in hushed tones. 'Mr Rigby, the dentist. Only he doesn't look well.'

'Mr Rigby?'

'That's right. He's just sitting there, saying nothing. I don't think he's even praying. And – well, it sounds ridiculous, but there was a wasp.' Fordyke took a deep breath and described what he had seen. Miss Havers listened carefully to him without interrupting, which was somewhat unusual. 'In the light of yesterday's sad events I feel a little alarmed, I have to say,' Fordyke concluded.

'Perhaps I'm overreacting, but I am considering contacting Squire Pink again.'

'Oh, no, I wouldn't do that,' advised Miss Havers firmly. She peered my-opically past the clergyman to where Rigby was hunched in his pew further down the church. 'What would you say was the matter with him, exactly?'

'I – I haven't the faintest idea. But. . . '

'You think I should have a word with him?'

'Well, no, not exactly. But, I mean, if you really want to. . . '

'Leave this to me, Vicar.' Miss Havers stepped past him and walked down the aisle towards Rigby's pew. Fordyke admired her spirit. Whatever had happened yesterday, and however abrupt she appeared to be this morning, there was an indomitable will in Miss Havers that would never back down.

She didn't even seem bothered by the rancid smell.

'We should go in, while we have the chance, rumbled Jode.

'No,' said Kala. It could be full of people worshipping whatever it is they worship in there. We don't know enough to take the risk.'

'Tell her, Fatboy.'

Fatboy gave his habitual shrug. 'We only know for certain that there are at least three people in there,' he said. 'The man with the device. The man who runs the place, some kind of priest or monk. And that female who's just 116

entered.'

'Three,' Jode said. 'We can take 'em. Come on!'

'Three that we *know* of, Jode.' Kala tried to maintain her patience, but it was difficult. She wanted to get the device back just as much as Jode did, but she had to be careful. And Jode wasn't helping matters much.

'Too late,' whispered Fatboy urgently. The scanner in his hand blipped. 'It's on the move again.'

'Damn.'

'Rapid. North-northwest from this point.'

'Let's go!' Jode erupted from the undergrowth, his SNS suit whirling with colours as it emerged from the darkened undergrowth into the full light of day.

' *Damn!* ' spat Kala, instinctively moving to follow him. Behind her Fatboy scooped up the scanning apparatus and tried to move out after them.

'Wait!' Kala sprinted after Jode. 'Let's think about this, you great lummo!'

'We've waited enough,' Jode called back, hurdling a gravestone and running around the back of the church. 'He's spooked! We lose him now and it's over!'

Kala pounded after him.

'Split up!' Jode yelled.

Damn you, thought Kala as she veered off around the opposite side of the building. If this snarls up, Jode, you've *had* it.

Kala flew over a neatly mown lawn and skidded down a slope that led to the metalled roadway running past. There was a low stone wall fronting the end of the slope, and Kala's boot struck it a glancing blow. It was enough to kill her balance and a moment later she hit the road itself with a bone-jarring thump.

She rolled to her feet, got up and hared along the road, circling the churchyard. Driving herself faster, she dashed up the rear of the church's approach road. A moment later she caught sight of Jode

leaping a hedgerow and disappearing into the adjoining field. She followed him over the hedge, scrambling out of the ditch on the far side, and caught up with him at a small copse of trees. Ahead was a large, empty field.

‘He’s gone,’ snarled Jode, chest heaving. ‘Lost him!’

‘You fool,’ panted Kala. ‘Spooked? He must have gone straight into cover when he heard you crashing after him!’

‘This is pointless,’ Jode hissed back. ‘It was difficult enough trying to track the device down when it was stationary. On the move it’s impossible!’

Kala bit her lip, trying to distract herself from the burning pain in her hands where she had broken her fall on to the road. ‘Fatboy?’

Fatboy was trudging through the long grass towards them, studying the scanner. ‘I’m maintaining the trace – but it’s weak. Whoever’s got it is already 117

doubling back towards the village.’

‘It’s going to activate,’ warned Jode. ‘Kala, you *must* use the bomb!’

‘Well, I really don’t know what to make of that,’ said the Reverend Ernest Fordyke.

‘Most remarkable,’ agreed Miss Havers.

‘What did you say to him?’

‘I – I’m not sure,’ Miss Havers seemed unusually ill at ease. ‘Nothing much.’

Nothing that would make him run away like that, at any rate. Perhaps he felt ill.’

‘Yes,’ said Fordyke. ‘I expect that’s it.’

Rigby smashed his way through the trees, batting aside the smaller branches and twigs. At one point he cracked his skull against a heavier limb, but he didn’t seem to feel it and he didn’t stop. They were on to him, they were hunting him. He knew that, although he didn’t know how. They wanted the device. He couldn’t let them have it. It was his. It was *him*.

He pushed on, legs numb and trembling. Eventually he emerged from the fields on to a road. He recognised the way into Marpling. This road led past the village green. And before that it passed a number of houses.

The faces of the people who lived in the village swam in his vision. He could recall them, but not their names. He didn't like any of them.

Except one. One face stuck out among all the others. A youth.

A boy, with black hair and golden-brown eyes.

He was a friend. He would help. He had to help!

Yes, the boy. And the boy had a name. He could remember it if he tried. He could remember it if it wasn't for the buzzing in his head! The thoughts and feelings in his chest, the dull ache of his guts and the things inside him.

Liam!

The name came to him in an agonising flash of pain. He felt part of his brain die away as he remembered.

Liam Jarrow.

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Chapter Nineteen

Professor Jacobs was waiting for them in the pathology lab, a wide roomy chamber with grey tiled walls and four large examination tables in the centre.

A series of electric lights were strung from a high ceiling, directly over the tables. The room smelled strongly of formaldehyde and rubber. The underlying whiff of decomposition was, however, sufficient to induce a fit of gagging in most visitors.

Jacobs was scrubbing up at a large sink as Gleave and the Doctor came in.

He vigorously lathered his hands and then rinsed them under what looked like scalding water judging by the amount of steam that billowed into the cool air. He then gave his hands a cursory wipe on a towel and turned to face his guests. He peered at them over the rims of his half-moon spectacles with button-bright eyes. 'You took your

time!’ he cried. ‘I haven’t got all day, you know.’

‘Sorry we’re late,’ said Gleave blandly. ‘Decided to stop off for a bit of breakfast.’

Jacobs nodded at Gleave over his spectacles and then did a double take as he spotted the Doctor. ‘Jiminy! Is this your expert, Inspector?’

‘I’m not sure what he is,’ admitted Gleave ruefully. ‘But, yes, this is the Doctor.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Professor,’ said the Doctor warmly, offering his hand.

Jacobs looked at it and then back up at the Doctor. Just scrubbed up, old chap. Sorry.’

‘Of course,’ said the Doctor politely and lowered his hand.

‘Inspector Gleave here called me on the telephone,’ said Jacobs, ‘and said you’d be coming. Don’t know what kind of field your expertise lies in, Doctor, but I’d like to know what you make of this. . . ’

Jacobs led the Doctor over to a long workbench set against the far wall. The bench was strewn with various kinds of tools and sundry equipment for use in postmortem examinations. Gleave could identify only the microscope, a row of glass bottles and a Bunsen burner. But the Doctor, apparently undeterred by all the scientific clutter, had already picked up a small glass dish containing a number of dead insects.

‘Wasps,’ said Gleave.

‘That’s right,’ confirmed Jacobs. ‘Three of ’em.’

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‘Where did you find them?’ asked the Doctor. He took out a pencil from his inside pocket and carefully poked one of the insects. It was curled up and dried out, its little yellow legs bent in towards its narrow-waisted body.

‘That’s the oddest thing,’ said Jacobs, peering over his half-moons. ‘I removed them from the mouth and nose of one Mr Anthony Williams this morning.’

‘The verger at St Cuthbert’s,’ said Gleave.

The Doctor nodded vigorously. ‘Yes, yes. But where exactly, professor?’

‘One of them was lodged between the back of his tongue and lower leftmost molar. Another was right at the back of the throat. The third was inside the right nostril. There might be others stuck further inside the nasal cavity, I haven’t been able to get that far yet.’

‘Hm,’ grunted the Doctor.

‘They appear to be perfectly ordinary, common wasps. . . ’ Jacobs mused.

‘Hmm.’

‘Never seen anything like it, myself.’

‘Except,’ said the Doctor, ‘in the body of Hilary Pink.’

‘Perhaps – I haven’t carried out the autopsy on Pink yet.’

‘What’s it all about, though?’ asked Gleave. ‘What’s going on with these wasps?’

‘That’s what we’re here to find out, Inspector!’ said the Doctor, flashing him the briefest of smiles. ‘Now, Professor Jacobs, I think we’d better take a look at Hilary Pink’s body, don’t you?’

‘Certainly,’ said Jacobs. ‘But I think I ought to make one thing clear at the outset, Doctor: I don’t actually need an assistant.’

‘That’s all right,’ said the Doctor, shrugging off his velvet coat. ‘Because I do. Pass me that apron, would you, Professor?’

Jacobs found himself automatically passing one of the leather aprons that hung at the end of the workbench before he realised what the Doctor had actually said. But it was too late. With muttered thanks, the Doctor took the apron and passed his frock coat to the professor in return. Jacobs stared at the coat for a long moment before Inspector Gleave diplomatically relieved him of it.

‘Now,’ said the Doctor, clapping his hands together loudly. ‘Where’s Mr Pink?’

Hilary Pink’s body lay on one of the examination tables under a shroud.

Gleave caught a glimpse of the man's feet poking out from beneath it before the Doctor swept the shroud away to reveal the corpse in full.

He was recognisable, but only just. His skin was sallow and waxy, his face strangely gaunt where gravity had already begun its remorseless pull on the 120

lifeless flesh. The eyes were sunken into stiff little folds of yellow skin. His raven-black hair looked brittle and stark against the white scalp.

The Doctor proceeded to examine Pink's face very closely, his nose almost touching that of the corpse. There was some scarring visible around the unshaven jowls, the lips in particular seeming puffy and purplish.

'Wasp stings, presumably,' commented Professor Jacobs, virtually relegated to peering over the Doctor's shoulder.

'Yes. Notice how they're concentrated around the mouth and nose. What does that tell you?'

'Well, based on the wasps I found in the other dead man's mouth, I'd say they were trying to get *inside*.'

'Exactly,' muttered the Doctor. 'The question is – how far did they get?'

He tucked his fingers into Pink's mouth and slowly prised the jaw open.

Gleave felt his guts tightening. He found the Doctor's clinical detachment rather disconcerting; he couldn't detect even a shred of sympathy.

He

watched, faintly nauseated, as Hilary Pink's teeth became visible, the gums whitish blue, the tongue black and swollen.

'Yes. . . ' murmured the Doctor, peering into the orifice. 'Plenty of wasps still in here. All dead by the look of them, probably crushed during the death throes.'

He stepped back and suddenly asked, 'Where's my coat?'

'On the bench over there,' Gleave pointed out. 'Why?'

‘Right-hand pocket,’ stated the Doctor. ‘Stethoscope. Would you be so kind?’

Abandoning the hope that the Doctor was ready to conclude his examination, Gleave retrieved the stethoscope and handed it over. The Doctor hooked it into his ears and held the instrument against Hilary Pink’s chest.

Professor Jacobs gave a snort of contempt. ‘Jiminy! What are you listening for? A heartbeat? The man’s as dead as a doornail.’

‘Shh!’ The Doctor continued to listen carefully, moving the stethoscope down Pink’s body towards the abdomen. Then he straightened and removed the hooks from his ears. ‘We’ll open him up here first, I think.’

‘Whatever for?’ asked Jacobs, clearly intrigued.

The Doctor looked blankly at him. ‘To see what’s inside, of course.’

Jacobs duly supplied the Doctor with a fresh scalpel, muttering that this was all most unconventional. ‘What do you expect to find?’

‘Let’s wait and see,’ suggested the Doctor, wielding the instrument with a flourish that Gleave found faintly disturbing. ‘You might be surprised.’

He made the quick, confident incision of a practised surgeon, from just below Pink’s sternum down to the navel. The skin parted stiffly, revealing a layer of white fat and purple muscle. A few seconds later, the Doctor had skilfully exposed the upper intestine.

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Gleave, grinding his teeth together, immediately saw that something was wrong. He had attended postmortem examinations before, and knew roughly how things should look inside a man’s stomach.

Hilary Pink’s intestines resembled nothing Gleave had ever seen before: the gut was hideously swollen, a dull yellow colour webbed with thick green veins.

‘Jiminy,’ breathed Professor Jacobs. He adjusted his half-moons for a better view.

‘Now that,’ stated the Doctor, ‘is not how it should be. . .’

‘Completely abnormal,’ agreed Jacobs. ‘Some kind of freak, perhaps?’

‘No no no,’ said the Doctor. ‘At least, not until this morning. What we have here is evidence of incredibly rapid cellular redesign.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The tissue has been deconstructed, cell by cell, and then rebuilt to a different pattern.

‘Rubbish.’

‘Professor, the proof is here, right before your eyes.’ The Doctor’s gaze held that of the pathologist for a good few seconds, until Jacobs swallowed hard and looked back down at the corpse.

‘But. . . but what could do that?’ he asked.

‘I think we’ll find the culprits in here,’ replied the Doctor, lowering the scalpel again to make a further incision. The tawny flesh parted and a small jet of blood erupted, causing the Doctor to flinch in surprise. Spots of red flecked his face.

The wound suddenly turned crimson as more blood welled up into the cavity.

‘That shouldn’t be possible,’ said Jacobs, disbelief evident in his tone. ‘This man’s been dead over six hours!’

‘Not possible?’ repeated the Doctor, watching the blood flooding the exposed flesh. Small, crawling shapes were floating to the surface. They quickly resolved into blood-slicked insects, shiny yellow and black bodies emerging from the gore. Some were creeping out on to the edges of the tissue, wings flexing as they prepared for flight.

‘Wasps,’ said the Doctor. ‘Quickly, Professor – get me something to catch them in, a jar or container of some sort!’

But Jacobs was still boggling at the sight of more wasps wriggling out of the corpse’s guts.

‘Professor Jacobs!’ shouted the Doctor. ‘Come on, man!’

Jacobs suddenly jerked into life. He snatched up a glass beaker from his workbench and threw it to the Doctor. The Doctor immediately upturned the jar over the wasps, and then snapped his fingers impatiently for something to 122

seal it with. Jacobs handed him a lid, which the Doctor quickly jammed on to the beaker.

‘There’s more coming,’ noted the professor shakily.

The Doctor put the beaker down and turned back to Hilary Pink’s body.

More wasps were indeed crawling out of the bloody abdominal wound. ‘I had no idea the infestation was so large,’ said the Doctor with some fascination.

‘Oh, Lord,’ breathed Jacobs as the cadaver began to tremble.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s just a reflex reaction. The wasps must have been trying to rewire his central nervous system as well.’

More wasps were boiling up out of the wound, milling around the edges of the flesh and dropping on to the examination table. Hilary Pink’s body was shaking uncontrollably now, legs and arms moving with stiff, urgent jerks as though it was about to leap off the table.

‘Don’t worry?’ gasped Jacobs, backing away. ‘We’ve got to do something!’

The Doctor instantly seemed to snap out of his fascination. He grabbed a bottle of laboratory ethanol from the nearby bench and poured it liberally over Pink’s exposed innards. The wasps immediately began to stir.

‘Quickly, Professor – a match!’

Jacobs recoiled. ‘You can’t mean to –’

‘Have you a better idea?’

‘Here, Doctor,’ said Gleave, offering his box of Swan Vestas. He felt utterly horrified. ‘Do it!’

Grim-faced, the Doctor quickly struck one of the matches and dropped it into the mass of soaking wasps. Blue and orange flames whooshed into existence as the ethanol ignited. The wasps were swallowed up in the conflagra-tion, curling up and blackening within seconds. Slowly the angry buzz was replaced by the pop and crackle of roasting flesh.

A little later, Inspector Gleave found himself standing outside the pathology lab, or rather leaning heavily against the nearest wall. He

still felt a little faint, and a cold sweat covered his body. Nervously he lit a cigarette, using the box of matches that he had given the Doctor. His fingers were trembling.

‘God, I’ve never seen anything like that in my life,’ he muttered, ‘and I hope I won’t see anything like it again.’

The Doctor seemed unmoved, and this no longer surprised the policeman.

In fact, the Doctor seemed to be more knowledgeable and in control than ever.

While Gleave leaned against a wall and took long, needful drags on a cigarette and Professor Jacobs sat with his head in his hands, the Doctor merely held up his little beaker with its captured wasp to the light so that he could see it more easily. The wasp was buzzing around inside, frenzied by its captivity. It 123

left tiny smears of Hilary Pink’s blood on the inside of the glass. Gleave felt his breakfast heave again.

‘There’s an intelligence operating here,’ said the Doctor thoughtfully. ‘I can’t tell if it’s artificial or not, but there’s definitely a controlling intelligence. . . .’

‘How can you know that?’ asked Jacobs dully. He still hadn’t got over the impromptu cremation of one of his pathology subjects.

‘They’re adapting very quickly,’ replied the Doctor, still scrutinising his wasps. ‘These originated from Charles Rigby, and they’ve learned a great deal from him already. That’s how they could affect Hilary Pink so rapidly.’

Gleave frowned. ‘You mean they knew exactly what to do with Pink because of what they’d learned from Rigby?’

‘Exactly. All the spadework had been done. Even though Hilary Pink died shortly after the wasps invaded him, they were still able to make massive internal changes at a cellular level. Once he was dead his body was useless to them – but there were already a great many trapped inside his corpse.’

‘You mean that they need to keep their victims alive?’

‘Oh, yes. Like Charles Rigby. But it isn’t easy, as they’ve discovered

with Tom Carlton, Hilary Pink and the verger. However, if they can take someone else over successfully, they'll find it a lot easier and quicker – because of what they've learned.'

'But – *why*?'

The Doctor took a deep breath. 'Good question.'

'What should we do now?' It seemed to Gleave the obvious next question, and he instinctively asked it of the Doctor.

'Rigby is the primary host,' stated the Doctor. 'You must make finding him your top priority, Inspector. You, Professor Jacobs, will have to arrange for the cremation of the other two bodies as soon as possible, just to be certain.'

'Yes, of course. . . '

'And what about you, Doctor?' asked Gleave.

The Doctor held up his jar. 'I want to take a closer look at our friend here

– see if I can find out exactly what's controlling them.' A steely blue light entered his eyes. 'And how to stop it.'

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Chapter Twenty

Liam Jarrow looked carefully at the face in the picture. He could see his father's eyes looking right back out at him – he couldn't tell what colour they were, of course, but they shone with love and courage. The photograph had been taken just days before he left for France, his mother had said. He looked so heroic in his uniform and cap.

Liam returned the photograph to its customary position on the mantelpiece, tears welling up in his eyes. He needed to be every bit as courageous as his father had been when he went off to fight the Hun. His mother was in the kitchen, still stirring the cup of tea Liam had made for her over an hour ago.

It was stone-cold now. When he looked in on her, he could see Tom Carlton's wedding ring glinting on her finger. Liam should have been sitting with her, comforting her, but he felt woefully inadequate. His bitter resentment of Tom Carlton's place in her life – in *their* lives –

had been a barrier between them that Carlton's death had only served to crystallise. Now Liam had another reason to hate Carlton: even in death, he had managed to set mother against son.

He looked in at her once more. His mother's face was puffy and red with grief, her eyes raw with the effort of crying all night long. For a moment Liam considered going in to sit with her. But he couldn't. He was frightened that his mother might express her grief by turning on him. He could sense that harsh words were only just around the corner.

There was a knock at the front door – or at least Liam thought it had been a knock. It was strangely persistent and forceful.

He checked quickly through the living-room window, which overlooked the path outside. Through the net curtains he could see someone in a familiar tweed jacket with brown leather patches on the elbows. 'Oh, no,' he murmured, and then, louder so that his mother would hear, 'It's Mr Rigby.'

'I don't want to see anyone,' croaked his mother from the kitchen.

But, with a sudden crunch, Charles Rigby's fist punched right through the front door.

Liam reeled back in shock. Rigby's hand now grasped the ragged edge of the door and heaved. More wood was torn away with terrifying ferocity. Liam backed against the far wall, gasping in fear as the entire door was kicked right out of its frame with a splintering crash. The door fell inwards to reveal Rigby 125

lurching in its wake.

His skin was grey and shiny with sweat. His hair was thin and dishevelled.

And there were wasps flying all around him – and in and out of his mouth.

‘Liiaaammmmm. . .’ the shambling figure cried, reaching out towards him.

Liam was assailed by a dreadful stench, like something from some animal’s flyblown remains. He slid away down the wall, his legs feeling horribly weak.

‘Liammm. . .’ Rigby’s voice was a slurred, painful rasp. ‘Liammm!’ He seemed to be staring plaintively at Liam, but his eyes were burning red. A scarlet teardrop ran down his face.

‘Can’t. . . stop. . . it. . .’ he gasped.

Liam almost choked with relief as his mother flew out of the kitchen to protect her son. But Rigby just swatted her aside with one blow. Then he turned back to Liam, who cowered on the floor, wedged between the wall and the carpet.

A part of him knew that he felt ashamed. A part of him recalled the brave young man in the photograph: the man who was his father, the man Liam aspired to.

Rigby’s face grew larger in his vision, tears of blood now streaming down the man’s pasty skin.

‘Ohhhh, Liiaammm. . .’ he cried, spitting wasps, and Liam caught a glimpse of the insects massing inside his gullet. ‘It hurrrtsss. . .’

Liam shook his head and cringed back further.

‘It hurrrrts, Liam. . .’ Rigby gurgled. ‘Help. . . meeee. . .’

‘Keep away!’ screamed Liam.

Wasps started to emerge from the man’s open mouth, floating out towards him.

‘Right,’ said Kala as they approached the house at a run. ‘We’ll do this my way: Fatboy, you take the rear; Jode and I will approach from the front.’

‘Let’s hope he’s in there,’ said Jode, slowing to a halt.

‘He is,’ Fatboy assured them. He carried on running, leaping the garden fence with one smooth motion and disappearing around the back of the house.

‘This is the place all right,’ said Jode, nodding at the wreckage of the house’s wooden entrance.

‘No foul-ups, Jode,’ said Kala, unhooking her neuro-stunner. ‘I want that device, not a bloodbath.’

Jode just looked back at her. ‘We’ll only get one chance at this. I’m not the one who’s gonna foul up.’

Then he turned and ran into the house.

* * *

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Liam suddenly became aware of someone else in the house, a large man in a one-piece coverall stepping over the stunned body of his mother as she lay in the decimated hallway. The man barrelled into Rigby with terrific force, knocking him clear off his feet. The two men went down in a heap, but Rigby’s assailant was thrown instantly clear. Rigby appeared inordinately powerful.

The big man smashed back against the wall, grunting with the impact. For a second he and Rigby faced each other.

And, in the gap between them, Liam saw someone else – this time a tall woman in a matching coverall, aiming some kind of hand weapon at Rigby. A brilliant blue light ignited the hallway for a split second and Rigby staggered backwards, snarling like an animal. The gun flashed again and Rigby gave another bestial howl.

‘It’s not stopping him,’ shouted the woman.

But it had distracted him. The big man picked up the wooden chair that stood by the living room and smashed it across Rigby’s back and shoulders.

Two of the chair’s stout legs flew off with a bark of snapped wood. Rigby whirled and swept the remains of the chair clean out of the big man’s hands.

Then he grabbed the man himself and threw him bodily into the kitchen.

Liam tried to scramble across to where his mother had fallen, but Rigby grabbed hold of him and hauled him into the kitchen as well.

The big man was getting dizzy to his feet as yet another figure – this one tall and thin – entered through the back door. This man strode confidently across the tiled floor and grasped Rigby around the back of his neck. Rigby's shoulders hunched in pain and he squealed like a rat. Liam admired the thin man's unnerving strength of grip, but it proved fruitless. Rigby slammed him aside, hurling him back across the kitchen table. Cups and saucers scattered loudly. The thin man hit the Aga and a welter of sparks flew into the air.

In the living room, Kala was trying to lift Gwen Carlton up off the floor. 'Come on, we can get out if we're quick,' she told her.

'Who are you?' asked Gwen, wiping blood from her nose. 'What's going on?'

'Never mind that now,' Kala said, urging her towards the front door. Together they slipped across the splintered remains, Gwen whimpering in fear and distress.

'Wait,' she suddenly said. 'Where's Liam?'

'Come on!' cried Kala. A sharp smell of burning wafted from the interior of the house, and its ominous tang followed them out into the brilliant daylight.

'Stay here,' ordered Kala, lowering the woman on to the grass outside.

'Don't move!'

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She darted back into the house, a cloud of grey smoke swallowing her into the darkness.

'OK,' said Anji. 'Where do you think we should start?'

She was standing with Fitz in the middle of the village. From here they could clearly see the Post Office General Store, the TARDIS and the White Lion.

Fitz nodded towards the last. 'How about the pub?'

Anji glowered resignedly at him. She was pretty well back to her old self, as far as Fitz could judge. He was being flippant in order to test just how much she had managed to unwind since leaving the Pink House. As ever, she was proving to be at her best when given

something definite and practical to do.

Both she and the Squire seemed to have buried their feelings about Hilary, for the time being at least.

‘Wait a sec – what’s that?’ Anji was pointing to the trees that lined the far side of the village green. Or, rather, just above the tree line, where a large smudge of smoke was drifting against the pale-blue sky.

‘Something’s on fire,’ realised Fitz.

Behind the trees they could see a row of small houses. As another, much larger puff of smoke rose above the rooftops, both Anji and Fitz simultaneously realised which particular set of houses they were looking at.

‘That’s Gwen Carlton’s place,’ said Anji, setting off at a run: Come on!’

Bright orange fingers were already clawing their way out through the windows of the little house, sooty black smoke spurting and belching in their wake. Fitz and Anji raced down the garden path to join Gwen Carlton on the lawn, where she lay sobbing and in terrible distress.

‘Is there anyone else in there?’ asked Anji briskly.

Gwen nodded. ‘Liam! Liam’s still in there!’

Anji glanced at Fitz, who looked at the front door. Smoke billowed out thickly, and, in the gloom beyond, he could see the crackling flames.

‘Well, go on!’ urged Anji. ‘Her son’s still in there!’

Fitz took a step forward, desperately trying to summon the will to risk his life. A big gout of flame erupted from the doorway with a fierce roar, and a wave of heat made the skin of his face prickle. He backed away. ‘It’s no use, I can’t get in! The heat –’

More flames spurted from the windows and the glass cracked loudly as the wooden frames distorted.

‘But Liam –’ sobbed Gwen, struggling against Anji to get inside.

‘It’s no use!’ shouted Anji. The smoke was rolling across the lawn now, forcing Anji to drag Gwen away coughing and choking.

Away from the house, they were joined by a number of villagers who had by now heard the commotion or seen the smoke. Some of them were undoubtedly from the neighbouring properties; others may have come from the pub.

Some of them were shouting for buckets of water.

Fitz backed away from the rising heat, almost bumping into someone on a bicycle. He twisted around to find Miss Havers watching the scene, firelight reflected in the lenses of her spectacles. 'Goodness! I saw the smoke – I never realised it was Mrs Carlton's house! Is anyone hurt?'

'We don't know,' said Fitz brusquely. 'We can't get inside!'

'Never mind that,' called Anji, still holding on to Gwen Carlton. 'Go and call the fire brigade!'

Fitz looked back at the house, which was now consumed in a roaring conflagration. Rather pathetically, people were still shouting for buckets of water.

But he didn't think even the Fire Brigade could save this place now.

Inside the house, Gwen Jarrow's kitchen was an inferno. The sparks had caught the dry paper lying on the Aga; at this time of year the nearby wooden table and chairs had been tinderbox dry. The house was made with low ceilings and small rooms, and the hungry fire had eaten its way through them with sickening speed.

Protected to a small extent by their camouflage suits, Kala and Jode had managed to pull Fatboy out of the blaze and haul him towards the back door.

It had swung shut during the fight, however, and Jode had to give it three mighty kicks before it flew open with a rush of cinders.

They staggered out and collapsed on to the grass as far from the rear of the house as they could manage.

Jode wasted no time in slapping Fatboy's shoulders and back to extinguish the flames. The kid just sat there and waited patiently until the fire was out.

His SNS suit was badly damaged, the fine mesh circuitry exposed through charred patches, its camouflage capability destroyed. Fatboy's

hair had been half incinerated, and the exposed skin of his scalp and one side of his face were terribly blistered.

‘Fatboy,’ hissed Kala, ‘can you hear me?’

‘Yes,’ replied Fatboy. His voice sounded oddly flat and metallic.

‘The fire shouldn’t have caused that much damage,’ said Jode.

‘I’m quite all right,’ said Fatboy. ‘The burns are superficial, Jode. There is no internal impairment.’

One side of his face was puckered beyond recognition, the skin now hard and shiny. The eye was melted shut. ‘You look a mess,’ said Kala.

‘There is some motor inhibition,’ Fatboy declared. ‘The plastic components in my leg joints have been deformed by the intensity of the heat.’ He flexed 129

one knee stiffly, and it gave an audible squeak.

‘That settles it, Kala,’ said Jode. ‘This is a disaster. We still haven’t got the device, and now Fatboy’s functionality is compromised. If the device is still in there –’ he nodded at the burning house – ‘then it could still be still activated.

We have no choice.’

Kala looked at Fatboy.

‘We *have* to detonate him,’ said Jode.

The house was burning fiercely now, and there was no hope of stopping it.

The heat had driven the villagers right back, and Fitz and Anji were left to comfort Gwen Carlton. She was almost faint with shock, murmuring her son’s name over and over. She finally collapsed in Fitz’s arms, tears streaming down her ash-flecked face.

‘It. . . was terrible,’ she wailed. ‘Horrible.’

‘What happened?’ he asked her softly.

‘Charles Rigby came in. . . attacked us. . .’ she sobbed.

‘Rigby?’ Fitz looked at Anji, and then at the blazing house. Part of the

roof fell in with a deafening boom, sparks flying into the air.

‘Do you think he’s still in there?’ Anji asked.

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘And Liam?’

Fitz bit his lip, gazing into the crackling flames with fearful eyes.

Behind the house, Kala was also staring into the raging fire. After a moment she turned back to Jode, who was gazing at her expectantly.

‘All right,’ she said, having to raise her voice above the noise of the flames.

‘I agree – but only up to a point.’

Jode stood up and regarded her bullishly. ‘But –’

‘Listen to me!’ She had to yell to secure his attention now. Then she took a deep breath and continued in a calmer tone of voice: ‘I’m willing to set the arming circuits but not start the timer. Not yet.’

Jode glared at her but said nothing. Perhaps even he realised that this was all he was going to get at this stage.

‘You have the secondary command code word,’ Kala stated, holding his gaze, ‘it’ll be your decision.’

A cloud of smoke blew past them, carrying ashes and the stench of burning in its wake.

Jode blinked. ‘You’ll set the arming circuits?’

In reply Kala simply knelt down next to Fatboy. Then, somehow contriv-ing not to look him in the eye, she gave the order. ‘Fatboy. Command code protocol: alpha-Kala. Codeword one: FAILURE.’

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Something deep inside Fatboy bleeped once.

Kala sighed, and then looked bleakly at Jode. ‘All that’s required now is your code word,’ she whispered.

‘How long do you want?’ Jode asked bluntly after the slightest pause.

‘I don’t know. Not long. But there is someone I want to see first.’

Jode frowned. ‘Who?’

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Chapter Twenty-one

The Doctor spent the journey from Penton deep in thought. Or at least that was how it seemed to Inspector Gleave, as he occasionally glanced across at his passenger to find him staring out of the side window. Gleave assumed the Doctor was cogitating on the events at the pathology lab, and the nature of the threat they now faced. Then again, he may just have been admiring the view as the countryside rolled by.

This latter assumption seemed to be borne out when the Doctor suddenly said, ‘Conkers!’

‘Pardon?’

The Doctor was tapping urgently at the passenger window and twisting around in his seat to peer at something the car had just sped past. ‘That was a horse-chestnut tree,’ he said excitedly ‘Loads of conkers on it – although it’s a bit early for them to fall just yet, I suppose.’

He sat back in his seat and sighed.

So much, thought Inspector Gleave, for his lending some thought to the case in hand. ‘Doctor,’ he began, feeling a little awkward. ‘I’m. . . glad I went along with you to the postmortem. If I hadn’t known – or seen the autopsy –

then Lord only knows what wrong turning I might be taking now.’

‘Left here,’ said the Doctor casually.

‘Sorry?’

‘The turning.’ The Doctor pointed. ‘Left.’

‘Right,’ said Gleave, pulling the car around as the turning came up.

‘Left!’

‘No, I mean *right*,’ insisted Gleave. ‘As in, “all right”.’

The Doctor frowned, looking back through the narrow rear window. 'Really? I could've sworn it was left. Still, you're from round here.'

'Not quite,' said Gleave. 'But I do know the way to Marpling, Doctor. Now, what was I saying?'

'I used to love playing conkers,' said the Doctor wistfully.

Gleave gave up and concentrated on the road. Marpling village hove into view and he drove the police car down the lane that led on to the centre of the village. The green slid past to his right, and he caught sight of a tall dark blue box with the word POLICE clearly visible above the doors. He avoided calling attention to it. Somehow it felt embarrassing that the Doctor was 133

being proved correct in such continuous and outrageous detail. Nevertheless, Gleave realised that he had now taken on board everything the man had claimed so far.

He cleared his throat, ready to apologise again. 'What I'm trying to say. . . '

he began.

'Humbugs!' shouted the Doctor.

'What?'

'Stop the car!'

Gleave hit the brakes and the car lurched to a halt outside the village Post Office. 'What is it?'

The Doctor looked as though a jolt of electricity had suddenly energised him. He opened the car door and leapt out. 'Drop me here. . . ' he called back at Gleave.

'I already have,' noted Gleave dryly.

'I want to buy some mint humbugs.'

'Mint humbugs?'

'For the brain.' The Doctor tapped the side of his head in a gesture that Gleave did not find comforting. 'Food for thought.'

'Oh, without a doubt,' Gleave agreed.

‘You can leave me here,’ the Doctor added. ‘I’ll check out the wasp in my TARDIS.’ He jerked his head in the direction of the blue police box on the other side of the green.

‘Er, good,’ replied Gleave uncertainly, but decided not to question the Doctor’s odd behaviour any further. ‘I’ll be at the Pink House, eagerly awaiting the results of your investigation.’

The Doctor nodded enthusiastically and Gleave quickly drove off.

They had taken Gwen Carlton back to the Pink House, where the Squire was only too glad to help. The tragic losses both had suffered in the last twenty-four hours made them naturally supportive of each other. Gwen finally seemed to draw a degree of strength in the company of Squire Pink, although the atmosphere remained unavoidably subdued.

‘I wonder how she’ll take it when she finds out Hilary’s dead, too,’ said Anji quietly.

‘Why?’ asked Fitz.

‘Oh, nothing.’

Puzzled, Fitz asked, ‘How do you feel about it now, anyway?’

She sighed. ‘I only met him for the first time yesterday morning, but. . . I don’t know. It seems like such a waste.’

Fitz was perplexed; he didn’t know how to take that. In many respects Hilary Pink had been a waster, a drunk even, and not the kind of person he 134

thought Anji would be attracted to in a month of Sundays. Maybe, he thought absently, there was hope for him yet. . .

But Anji had been watching him and read his expression. Her eyes flashed darkly. ‘It wasn’t like that, you oaf. He just seemed to have such potential. . .

but I don’t think it was ever really fulfilled. And now it never will be.’

Fitz shrugged, and decided to change the subject. ‘Wonder what the Doctor’s up to.’

Anji snorted. ‘I think he’s avoiding us, Fitz.’

‘Nah,’ retorted Fitz instantly. ‘That’s not true. You know he likes to go off and do his own thing.’

Anji rubbed distractedly at the wasp sting on her hand. ‘He doesn’t *care*, though, Fitz.’

‘Of course he cares! He wouldn’t do the things he does if he didn’t.’

Anji looked at him. ‘You really love him, don’t you?’

‘Well, I like to think we’re just good friends. . . ’

‘No, I mean you can’t see it, can you? He does the things he does simply because he *can*, not because he really cares. It’s just something for him to do.

Like a distraction, or a game.’

Fitz shook his head. ‘You’re wrong, Anji.’

‘We’ll see,’ she said.

They both heard the sound of a car pulling up on the gravel outside. They looked out to see Inspector Gleave clambering out of a black police car. ‘Uh-oh,’ murmured Fitz. ‘The flatfoots are here.’

‘What does he want?’ wondered Anji.

‘This whole village is going to be crawling with cops now,’ Fitz ruminated.

Gleave stalked in through the open front door, removing his hat when he saw Anji.

‘Evenin’ all,’ said Fitz.

The inspector regarded him coolly. ‘You’re the Doctor’s friends, aren’t you?’

‘That’s right,’ said Anji. ‘Where is he?’

‘The Doctor?’ Gleave raised a resigned eyebrow. ‘I’ve just dropped him off at the Post Office.’

Anji shot Fitz a pointed look.

‘I think he’s quite mad, if you don’t mind me saying so,’ added Gleave.

‘Said he wanted to buy some mint humbugs!’

Anji just rolled her eyes and Fitz grimaced.

Gleave scowled. ‘Did I say something wrong?’

The Doctor came out of the Post Office General Store with a spring in his step and a quarter of mint humbugs in a little paper bag. He stopped outside and breathed in the fresh summer air. Right next to him was a bright red 135

pillar box. It looked brand-new, the pride of the GPO. He reached out and let his fingers play over the initials GR embossed above the slot where the letters went. George Rex. A sad smile played briefly across his lips as he remembered, his thoughts set wandering. Then he let his gaze travel further afield. The village green was a picture of rural tranquillity: soft grass ruffled by the slightest warm breeze, birds singing, the distant mutter of lunchtime business in the local pub. It was a picture that would remain with him for ever, resonating with something imprinted on his psyche a long time ago.

Eventually his gaze settled on the stout shape of the old police box on the far side of the green.

He set off towards it, humming an aria from *Madame Butterfly*. The TARDIS

had landed beneath the branches of an old oak tree that dominated the corner of the village green. The leaves cut the sunlight into hundreds of little bright-blue spots scattered all over the exterior.

As he walked up to the police box, someone stepped out from behind it.

‘Kala,’ said the Doctor. If he was surprised he didn’t show it. ‘Mint humbug?’

Kala glanced down at the proffered paper bag and shook her head. ‘I thought I might find you here.’

‘Why?’ asked the Doctor, his tone unreadable.

‘This is your time machine, isn’t it?’ she said, feeling the corner of the box.

‘Is it?’

Kala withdrew her hand. 'I haven't got time to play games, Doctor.'

'It's a bit late for that,' replied the Doctor sternly. 'Your device has already caused the deaths of three men and made another into something unhuman.'

I don't know how it's all going to end, but it won't be pretty. I've finished *my* messing about.' As if to underline his point, the Doctor stuffed a mint humbug into his mouth.

'That's why I want to talk,' said Kala. 'Things have reached a critical stage.'

'I'g shay dare orgeddy agga giddigul gage!'

Kala just stared at him.

The Doctor thrust the mint humbug into the side of his mouth, where it formed a huge bulge in his cheek. 'I said, I'd say they're already at a critical stage,' he reiterated. 'I offered to help you but you wouldn't have it.'

'You don't understand.'

A sudden thought seemed to strike him. 'Where are your two chums?'

'Fatboy and Jode. That's my whole point, Doctor. You won't understand if you don't let me explain.' Kala took a deep breath. 'Fatboy is a nuclear device.'

If we can't recover the artefact, my orders are to detonate him.'

The Doctor simply stared at her for a moment, the expression in his summer-sky eyes unreadable. He sucked on his mint humbug and then said,

'You'd better come in.'

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Frowning, Kala watched him produce a key from his waistcoat pocket and unlock the police-box door.

The Pink House had become a hive of activity. As well as the Squire himself, who was talking to Gwen Carlton, the grange had become a sort of unofficial headquarters for Inspector Gleave's investigation. Uniformed policemen collected statements, wrote carefully in little

notebooks, and generally clomped around getting in the way.

Additionally, people were stopping by from Marpling to offer their condolences to Squire Pink on the death of Hilary. Anji and Fitz, observing all the toing and froing, got the distinct impression that the village had developed a rather soft spot for their infamous black sheep over the years. Perhaps, Anji had commented sadly, Hilary Pink hadn't been quite so vilified as he had thought.

Inevitably, however, there was only one real topic of conversation: the terrible events at Gwen Carlton's house.

'At least,' Fitz said quietly to Anji, 'it looks as though Charles Rigby's paid for his crime – in full.'

'Dead, you mean?' said Anji with customary straightforwardness.

Fitz nodded. 'Well, nothing could've survived that.'

'And Liam Jarrow?'

Fitz winced. 'He was an all-right kid. He didn't deserve that.'

'Things are never black and white, are they?'

Miss Havers returned at this point, no doubt unable to resist the general hullabaloo, and asked to speak urgently to the officer in charge of the investigation, purporting to have vital news. Fitz and Anji couldn't help but be intrigued by such a claim.

'Watch yourself,' Fitz advised Gleave lightly.

Gleave raised his eyebrows. 'I've handled drunks, wife-beaters and murder-ers in my time, Mr Kreiner. I think can manage the village gossip.'

Miss Havers, despite Fitz's initial concerns, did have some important news.

She had come directly from Gwen Carlton's house, or rather the remains of it, where the Penton Fire Brigade had now finished putting out the fire and were investigated the charred wreckage.

'But neither Mr Rigby's remains nor those of young Master Jarrow have been found,' said Miss Havers excitedly.

Reaction ran like a jolt of electricity through everyone listening.

Several voices came in response, the loudest of which was Gwen Carlton's: 'Liam's alive?'

'We can't be sure of that,' warned Anji quickly. But Gwen Carlton had lost too much too quickly not to seize upon the tiniest fragment of hope. To her 137

it was the final chance for breath before she disappeared under an ocean of grief.

'We should check first,' Fitz said hurriedly, not wanting Anji to appear too brutal. A buzz of conversation broke out and Fitz rounded on Anji. 'Now who's being callous?'

'I don't want her hopes raised unnecessarily by that old windbag,' objected Anji.

'Hope is all she's got left, Anji!'

Inspector Gleave had already organised a constable to liaise with the fire officers currently at the site by the time they arrived. The house was little more than a blackened shell, steam still pouring from the sodden remains.

There was nothing remotely salvageable, but Gwen Carlton was filled with the tremulous hope that perhaps Liam had managed to escape the devastation.

'I can't believe he's gone,' she told Squire Pink as they surveyed the smoking ruins. 'I said that, didn't I? That I couldn't believe he's gone. . .'

'Yes,' said the Squire, 'you did.'

'But where is he if he made it out alive?' wondered Gleave aloud, speaking to Fitz and Anji.

The three of them were standing some way apart from the others, staring pointlessly into the debris.

'And just as much to the point,' added Anji, 'what about Charles Rigby?'

Fitz said, 'We had rather hoped he was. . . well, dead.'

Inspector Gleave clapped his hands together decisively. 'Well, then, it looks as if we'll just have to mount another search, doesn't it?'

Anji and Fitz looked at each other. 'If Rigby survived the fire,' said Anji, and Liam is missing, then it doesn't take a great detective to work out that they're probably together.'

Fitz nodded, and looked at the smoking remains of Gwen Carlton's house.

'If the kid's with Rigby,' he muttered, 'then frankly I don't rate his chances any more than if he'd stayed in there.'

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Chapter Twenty-two

Kala looked around her in simple amazement.

'It's not possible,' she declared.

The Doctor just looked at her, briefly, from his position by the control console. It was a broad hexagonal affair, apparently made from wood and supporting a wide glass tube at its centre. Inside this column, filaments gave off a soft glow that lent his angular features a ghostly aspect. His eyes flicked back down to the control panel, where his fingers made a series of adjustments to the complicated array of switches and levers. The machine hummed and murmured quietly in response.

Eventually, he said, 'This is the TARDIS, and not only is it perfectly possible, but it is also solid fact. Well, as solid fact as anything in this universe can be. . . '

The six walls of the control chamber were also wood-panelled, and patterned with ranks of circular indentations. Some of the walls had tall arches leading to yet more rooms – including, Kala briefly noticed, a library and some kind of laboratory.

Eventually Kala forced herself to stop gaping and focused her attention on the Doctor. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'I thought we'd already had the introductions.'

'I need to know what you're doing here, what your involvement is.'

'I'm just a visitor,' he said. 'What's your excuse?'

Kala decided to give him as much as she felt was necessary, in the hope of fostering some kind of mutual trust. 'You already know I've

been sent here to intercept and recover a device from the far future –’

‘Sent?’ interrupted the Doctor. ‘By whom?’

‘I can’t tell you that.’

‘Because then you’ll have to kill me, eh?’

‘It’s not like that,’ she objected.

‘Isn’t it?’ The Doctor busied himself at the controls again, twiddling knobs and checking dials, and, Kala sensed, actually doing nothing very much at all. At the same time she had the distinct impression that his mind was racing. ‘This device of yours,’ he said casually, almost as though he wasn’t really bothered, ‘what does it do, exactly? What’s it for? No, don’t tell me: it’s a secret.’

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‘You’re not making this very easy, Doctor.’

‘Tell me about Fatboy, then.’ This time Kala detected an edge to his voice –

one hardened by real concern. And she could see it in his eyes, too – reflecting the azure luminescence of the central glass column, they glowed like lasers.

After his initial prevarication he was homing in on the crux of the matter.

Suddenly he seemed struck by a thought: ‘He’s a robot, isn’t he?’

‘A *robot*?’ Kala felt herself beginning to smile.

‘Yes! An android, a mechanical simulacrum of some kind.’ Embarrassed, he seemed to want to cover up his old-fashioned simplicity with a torrent of words. ‘Full artificial intelligence with omnitronic control processors, am I right? I knew there was something odd about him. . .’

He walked in a swift circuit around the console as he thought aloud: ‘Of course, of course. He’s a walking, talking hydrogen bomb.’ He caught her amused look and scowled. ‘All right, a thermonuclear device, if that’s what you prefer.’

Abruptly he leaned his fists on the console, shoulders hunched. ‘But

why?

What would you want to explode a nuclear weapon here for?’

‘It’s really very simple,’ she replied.

‘I doubt that!’

Kala struggled to keep her voice steady and confident. She could detect the anger swelling up inside him and, frankly, it made her nervous. ‘As I was saying, my mission here is to find that device, the artefact, if you like. It’s actually some kind of secret weapon –’

‘I might have known.’

‘– purely experimental at this stage.’ Kala steeled herself to press on regardless. ‘We believe rogue time thieves stole the weapon and then lost it in a random time-transduction leap.’

‘Rogue time thieves?’

‘Illegal time-jumpers. They use jury-rigged transduction apparatus without any permit.’

The Doctor arched an eyebrow. ‘Do they really?’

‘They can cause a lot of trouble. This particular lot target hi-tech weaponry for sale on the black market.’

‘And you think I’m one of these thieves?’

‘No.’ Kala met his hypnotic glare the best she could. ‘Their transduction beam wasn’t calibrated properly, so the thieves were vapourised before they even arrived at this point in time.’

‘Nasty,’ mused the Doctor.

‘Of course the nonorganic weapon survived the jump. My team and I have been sent back to retrieve it, but before you ask – no, I don’t know what 140

kind of weapon it’s supposed to be. I’m never told the full details – it’s on a need-to-know basis only.’

The Doctor’s eyes blazed with contempt, and she felt herself faltering. She took a deep breath. ‘If the weapon is activated, then my orders are to deploy Fatboy and sterilise the entire area.’

‘With a thermonuclear blast.’

‘Precisely. If the weapon *has* been activated, then only a tactical nuclear strike will clear the damage and prevent it from further dissemination.’

‘Secret weapon,’ said the Doctor, straightening up. ‘Purely experimental.’

Need-to-know basis. Tactical nuclear strike. Sterilise the area. . . Have you any idea how you sound?’

‘I’m not here to apologise.’

‘You’re talking about nuclear devastation – I think we’ve moved a bit beyond saying sorry.’

‘You’re exaggerating.’

‘Maybe. But what you’re proposing is a. . . ’ He struggled for just the right word. ‘An outrage.’

‘It’s better than the alternative,’ she argued fiercely. ‘If the weapon is allowed to run its course, then all life on this planet will be under threat. That simply cannot be allowed to happen.’

‘But a nuclear explosion!’

‘. . . Is the only thing that will neutralise the effects of the weapon – and only then if its effects are still contained within a certain radius. Say fifteen kilometres.’

The Doctor was still aghast. ‘But it’s only 1933! The first atomic bomb wasn’t – won’t be – dropped until 1945. The first nuclear bomb won’t be detonated until 1953.’

Kala shook her head. ‘Now you’re just being pedantic. There were hundreds of nuclear explosions in the twentieth century.’

‘Not in the middle of England there wasn’t!’

‘That’s just detail. The end result is all that matters. The –’

‘The end result is that you’ll alter Earth’s entire history!’

‘Not true.’ She felt on more certain ground now. ‘It will only alter this small part of Earth’s history.’

‘And the future?’

‘. . . Will run its course.’ Kala softened her tone, trying to break the news as gently as she could. ‘In my time, the twentieth century is nothing more than an historical footnote: the dawn of the Atomic Age.’

‘But it *must* affect the future.’

‘Perhaps it does. But not much. A nuke going off twenty years before its time – so what? On the sort of timescale we’re talking about, it’s no more 141

than *that*.’ She clicked her fingers sharply. ‘Either way, my future will still exist. Otherwise I wouldn’t be here – it’s immutable.’

The Doctor stood his ground, replying through gritted teeth: ‘Your future –

the future of the whole planet – will be changed irrevocably. That is simple fact.’

She smiled. ‘Time travel doesn’t work like that, Doctor.’

‘Don’t try to tell me how time travel works!’ For just a second the Doctor looked unsure, but quickly recovered his composure. ‘I can’t let you do it,’ he said firmly.

For a minute they just stared at each other, realising that an impasse had been reached – a line in the sand separating them, perhaps for ever. They stood on the brink of becoming opponents.

‘Let me put it into perspective for you,’ Kala began, ignoring the glowering look she received in reply. ‘This is the middle of the twentieth century. . . .’

‘Actually, August the twenty-eighth, 1933.’

‘Whatever. If a tactical nuclear weapon had been detonated, say, three thousand years ago on this very spot. . . well, it wouldn’t really make all that much difference to the here and now, would it? History would heal over the wound.

In three thousand years the evidence will be non-existent, the effect negligible.’

The Doctor pointed a rigid finger at the TARDIS doors. ‘Go out there

and stand on the village green, and then tell me that the effect will be *negligible* for the people who live here.'

'Doctor, I can't spare them only to let the whole planet suffer. It's nothing more than damage limitation.'

'Which brings us back to the cause of all this,' he said, his lips curling in disdain: 'Your experimental secret weapon from the future.'

Kala let out a long, quiet breath. She hoped she detected the slightest change of tack, perhaps even the beginnings of a truce. 'Yes,' she said.

The Doctor ran a finger along the edge of the control console and sniffed.

'It strikes me that you're approaching the problem from the wrong angle. You shouldn't be aiming for damage limitation. You should be aiming to stop the device activating at all.'

Here comes the difficult bit, thought Kala. 'It *has* already activated. Hasn't it?'

The Doctor paused for a long time before replying, with the barest hint of defeat, 'Yes.'

'Then my duty is clear.'

The Doctor pursed his lips. 'Only one question remains.' They looked at each other closely, before the Doctor continued. 'Why did you come and tell me all this?'

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Kala did not reply, perhaps only now realising that she didn't really know the answer to that one herself.

'Confession?' wondered the Doctor, his blue eyes penetrating. 'You've come to the wrong place for absolution. Permission? You don't take your orders from me.' He shook his head, and, finally, walked around from the opposite side of the console to stand by her. 'No, I think you've come here for something else entirely.'

His lips twitched into the ghost of a smile. 'I think you've come for a second opinion.'

Liam Jarrow tried not to look at Rigby's face. The small glimpse he had allowed himself was more than enough to convince him that

further examination was not a good idea.

He remembered how Rigby had looked before all this – was it only yesterday? – the kindly face, the knowledgeable eyes and calm voice.

But overlaid on that image was the more recent memory of a dishevelled, open-mouthed man with tears of blood smeared down a white face. And now Liam kept his eyes tightly shut, but the sight was printed indelibly in his mind's eye: the skin burned black; the eyes, staring madly out of the crisp flesh, swilled red with blood; the neatly combed hair gone, the scalp puckered and charred.

And there was the smell, which was something he couldn't avoid. Like rotting fish or meat.

Liam still didn't know exactly how he had escaped serious injury in the fire.

He recalled the flames and the heat, and the incredible noise. He had been amazed how quickly the blaze had taken hold; he wasn't even sure what had started it.

He had been pulled out of the flames before they could do any more than singe his clothes, pulled out by a figure bent low under a haze of crackling orange fire. Coughing and retching, Liam had been hauled free, dragged across soil and grass, through bushes. He had cried out but his mouth was full of hot ashes. Even now the sharp odour of the smoke was still stinging at the back of his throat.

But now he began to realise the truth.

Rigby had saved him.

He opened his eyes a fraction and glanced at him, saw the hardened, mottled flesh. Summoning every scrap of courage he possessed, Liam said, 'Let me go. . . Please let me go.'

Rigby twisted around to stare at him, the manoeuvre strangely unnatural.

His eyes were crimson. Liam physically recoiled as Rigby let out a harsh grunt that could have been born of anger or fear. One of Rigby's large hands

was fastened around Liam's left wrist, so that he could pull him closer to his stinking body.

Liam didn't know where he was, but he had to get away.

'Let me go, please!' He tried to twist his arm free, but felt the bones grind painfully in the man's grip. There was no escape.

'Get. . . in!' growled Rigby, swinging him around and throwing him against a long, low car. Liam dimly recognised it, but he was too terrified to think why.

He stumbled into the passenger seat as Rigby clambered awkwardly behind the steering wheel. Wasps were crawling over the hard, parched skin of his head.

'Where are you taking me?'

Rigby let out a noise that might have been a laugh or a cry of pain. The inside of his mouth was pink and moist, bright against the charred lips. Wasps dotted his tongue.

'Why won't you let me go?' Liam asked pitifully.

'Must. . . get. . . away. . . .' The words were forced out of his mouth, accompanied by more buzzing wasps and the hot, acrid stench of his breath.

The car's engine roared and the vehicle pulled suddenly forward, the tyres skidding loudly.

' Must. . . get. . . us. . . away. . . from here. . . '

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Chapter Twenty-three

Charles Rigby gripped the steering wheel so hard he thought he might tear it free. He could feel the leather under his hands, but the leather felt sticky and coarse. He couldn't see what was the matter with it, not properly, because there was something wrong with his eyes. Everything was red and black, blurred shapes swelling and congealing in his vision like something from a nightmare.

The car bucked as he drove it over something and the child next to him shouted in fear. Or was it joy? It was hard to tell, because he couldn't hear properly either at the moment. His head seemed to be full of a buzzing noise, like a saw working its way slowly through his brain, cutting it up and rear-ranging it. It made him feel faint and a

little bit sick.

A part of his brain that had yet to be dissected was screaming, *What's wrong with me?*

His stomach churned, his guts racked with pins and needles.

He tried to focus on the steering wheel again, but it remained lost in the swirling red haze. He couldn't see his own hands. For that matter, he couldn't even feel them. He tried gripping the wheel more tightly, although it didn't seem to make any difference. But he could sense the metal of the wheel bending and buckling as he increased the pressure.

And that was good.

The child was shouting again, yelling something, but Rigby couldn't hear him over the buzzing. The noise tickled inside Rigby's head, like the wasps that tickled his lips and nose and throat.

He tried to smile, to reassure the boy, but it only seemed to make him scream more.

The laboratory was a confusing mishmash of scientific apparatus from every era: microscopes, oscilloscopes and scanners of every conceivable design –

and these were just the things Kala recognised – cobbled together in apparently random order and functionality. A ridiculous wardrobe-sized computer bank with spinning tape spools stood against one wall, chattering stupidly and redundantly to itself. It was almost as though the Doctor had made a point of collecting equipment from all over time and space and dumped it in here, in the faint hope that it might one day prove useful.

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A tangle of retort stands and test tubes covered a long bench, and it was towards this that the Doctor led Kala through an archway. As he did so he produced, like some mad magician, a small jar containing a live insect from his coat pocket.

'What is that?' Kala had asked, disgusted.

'Good question,' he replied enigmatically. 'That's what I came here to find out.'

‘Is this relevant?’ Kala had begun to worry about the man’s sanity again.

‘It’s fundamental!’ the Doctor called back over his shoulder. ‘We need to know what this secret weapon of yours actually does, if we’re to stand any chance of stopping it.’

He had put the jar down on a bench in the middle of the cluttered laboratory and rubbed his hands together.

‘But. . . an insect?’

‘Wasp. It came out of Hilary Pink’s stomach – or what was left of it, at any rate.’ He bent down and peered closely at the insect as it crawled around the inside of the jar. ‘I think it’s been exposed to your secret weapon.’

His insistence on referring to the device as ‘your secret weapon’ was beginning to grate. ‘You’re not making any sense at all,’ she said spikily.

He looked up at her, earnest confusion written all over his face.

‘I mean, isn’t this somewhat academic?’

‘Hardly.’ A steely determination entered his eyes. ‘If we can determine the exact nature of the weapon’s effect, we might be able to find a way to counteract it.’

She looked at him blankly. ‘And?’

‘And,’ he continued with forced patience, ‘we can then avoid the necessity of detonating your nuclear friend.’

‘Ah.’

The Reverend Ernest Fordyke had filled his day with a string of mundane tasks, each dull little chore designed to take his mind off the horrible atmosphere in the church.

He stopped brushing the dust into a pan as he realised what he was thinking. How could his church – any church – have a horrible atmosphere? Surely that was a contradiction in terms! Wasn’t it?

Fordyke was confused. His trust in the Lord remained unshakable, and was the rock he stood on. But his faith in mankind itself was taking quite a bit of punishment at the moment. Not in the usual, obvious

sense of man's recurrent and unending inhumanity to man, but in the simple sense of wrongness that permeated the village now. Perhaps, as a community focal point, he felt it more strongly than his parishioners, as separate individuals, did.

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It had started with Miss Havers, he was quite certain about that. Her behaviour had always been considered odd by the villagers, but Fordyke knew her better than most people, and he was worried for her. The business with the gypsies seemed to have marked the beginning of the change. . . And weren't gypsies supposed to be unlucky?

The terrible death of Williams the verger had shaken him, distracted him from Miss Havers and, indeed, the rest of his parish. It had happened so close to home, as it were. If this was indeed God's house, then the verger had died a horrible, agonising death right on his doorstep. And, if truth be told, Fordyke found that a bit difficult to swallow.

He started to brush up again, and stopped as he heard a noise that set the hairs on the back of his neck prickling.

A wasp.

He knew it instinctively, the quiet buzz of a trapped wasp. He looked up and saw one flying straight across the altar and heading up towards the roof. With a shock he realised that there were more up there – floating lazily around in the roof space, some of them bobbing along the rafters as though searching for something. An exit probably. But how come there were so many in here, anyway?

He left the brush and pan where they were on the floor and backed away, watching the wasps carefully. Perhaps there was a nest up there. That may explain the attack on Williams. Could he have disturbed them?

Fordyke realised he was sweating. The wasps frightened him. After the business with Williams, and then with Charles Rigby this morning. . .

A wasp flew into his vision, low and heading straight for him. He ducked, suddenly filled with panic. The wasp buzzed past his ear, circled his head and then returned to its fellows in the roof.

A moment later, a whole squadron of them zoomed down from the

rafters like aircraft on a bombing run, aiming straight for him.

Fordyke picked up his skirts and ran for the vestry. He skidded through the door, slammed it shut behind him and scrambled for the lock. But there wasn't one. He settled for holding the door closed with the weight of his body, chest heaving with exertion and fear. The wasps would be on the other side now, crawling all over the wood, squeezing through the crack between the door and the frame, trying to get to him.

He looked down at his feet. The bottom of the door stood clear of the stone floor by about half an inch. Even as he watched, a small yellow and black shape eased through the gap and floated up towards him.

Others quickly followed, but Fordyke sprang across the vestry and whipped open the rear door. This led out into the blessed fresh air and freedom. He 147

sprinted across the lawn, vestments flapping around his legs. Surely they couldn't reach him out here, he thought.

And then he remembered the verger, and ran that little bit faster.

The Doctor sat at a workbench in front of the array of retort stands and glass test tubes, watching various fluids bubbling through a complicated web of rubber pipes and filters. Heated by a combination of Bunsen burners and laser excitation, the resultant solution ultimately dripped into a large glass beaker perched on a mat at the far end of the bench.

The Doctor followed its progress intently. As the beaker grew full, he twisted a tap somewhere in the labyrinth of tubes to shut off the flow. Then he took a pair of tongs, carefully lifted the beaker and poured its contents into two mugs.

'There,' he said. 'Nice cup of tea.'

Kala stared at the steaming brown liquid suspiciously.

'Helps me think,' explained the Doctor, taking a sip from one of the mugs.

'Go on, try it.'

'Shouldn't we be checking the wasp?' Kala said.

‘Yes, of course.’ He crossed over to the antique brass microscope. Holding his mug of tea in one hand, he bent down and peered with one eye into the top of it. His free hand made a number of tiny adjustments to a knurled wheel at the base of the device.

‘That’s interesting. . . ’ he murmured. He straightened up and then plugged some kind of electronic scanner into the base of the microscope using a tiny jack. He hit a switch on the scanner and Kala jumped as a detailed X-ray blow-up of a wasp appeared as a hologram right in front of her, apparently projected from the microscope’s eyepiece. The insect rotated 360 degrees, exposing its schematic innards for all to see.

‘Very interesting,’ the Doctor said, sipping his tea.

Kala realised this was a game of some kind now: she was now supposed to say, ‘Why, Doctor?’ She was more convinced than ever that he was in fact slightly mad, but couldn’t bring herself to start humouring him.

‘ *Most* interesting. . . ’ he added.

They both stared at the wasp image while the Doctor finished his tea. Then, slightly disgruntled, he turned to look at Kala. ‘Well, aren’t you going to ask me why it’s interesting?’

She raised an eyebrow at him.

‘Humour me,’ he said, smiling wickedly, and she physically jerked with the shock. Could he read her mind?

Apparently satisfied, the Doctor carried on: ‘It’s interesting because the wasp, biologically and structurally, is perfectly normal.’

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Kala couldn’t help but feel that this was a little disappointing, and even the Doctor’s shoulders seemed to have slumped. ‘I suppose even that tells us something, though,’ he muttered peevishly.

‘What, exactly?’ asked Kala, only to realise that she had, this time, fallen straight into his trap.

‘That all this would be so much easier if I could take a proper look at the weapon itself. Wait!’ The Doctor leapt to his feet with explosive force. ‘Wait-waitwait. . . ’ He began to rummage through his pockets,

eventually producing a neatly folded handkerchief. Laying it on the table, he flicked open the pris-tine white material to reveal a nugget of black glass at its centre.

‘What’s that?’ Kala asked, giving up completely.

‘It’s a fragment of your secret weapon,’ the Doctor announced triumphantly.

‘I’d forgotten I still had it!’

‘Forgotten?’

‘Well, I wouldn’t have forgotten it if I hadn’t been so distracted by all this talk of walking nuclear bombs.’ The Doctor picked up the fragment and held it to the light of a nearby angle-poise lamp, where it flickered with emerald sparks.

‘You’ve had this all the time? Since when?’

‘Since I found it in Charles Rigby’s shed. Somehow he must have discovered it and hidden it there. He couldn’t have known what it really was. But there was something else in that shed: a wasps’ nest.’

‘I think I’m beginning to see. . . ’

Now if the weapon was somehow activated inside the shed. . . ’

‘. . . the wasps would have been exposed to its effects.’ Kala nodded. ‘You’ve already told me that.’

‘Yes, but think about it. This weapon won’t have been devised to work on insects, will it? Its purpose, presumably, is to affect human beings. But the wasps, purely by accident, were its first victims. And that is interesting, isn’t it?’ Staring intently at the black fragment, the Doctor picked up the second mug of tea and started to drink.

The car bounced along the road, rocking on its suspension as Rigby threw the steering wheel this way and that. He was driving like a madman, which was entirely appropriate, thought Liam.

The car had belonged to Hilary Pink. Liam recognised it easily enough now.

Was it only yesterday that he had ridden in it with the Doctor and his friend, Fitz, to visit Charles Rigby’s house? Only yesterday since he and Fitz had used it to flee from that same house? It didn’t seem real.

He found that, if he shrank down in the passenger seat and held on to the interior door handle for dear life, he felt relatively safe. That was unless Rigby 149

smashed the car headlong into a tree or something, which seemed quite likely.

But so long as he was concentrating on driving the car, he wasn't looking at Liam. Or trying to communicate with the rasping grunts Liam had now come to expect from his former friend.

Liam had settled down now, determined to try to survive the trip at least until the car stopped – or slowed down enough to give him a chance to make a run for it. This Charles Rigby clearly wasn't the same kindly and indulgent gentleman Liam had come to know. It seemed so unreal, to see this shambles of a man, burned and broken, yet dressed in the same comfortable tweeds Liam had seen him in every day. But one thing was certain – he had to get away.

The car screamed around a bend, skidding and scraping along the hedgerows. Liam was surprised to see someone he knew – a face he recognised at least – as the car sped along. Mr Fordyke was running down the lane from St Cuthbert's church. He seemed to be in a panic about something. Before Liam could alert him to his own plight, however, Rigby sent the car hurtling past the clergyman. For a brief moment Liam locked eyes with Fordyke.

And then he was gone, his shout lost in the roar of the car's exhausts.

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Chapter Twenty-four

The Doctor straightened up, brushing back the mass of long dark hair that had fallen over his face. His features, when revealed, were creased into a frown of deep puzzlement.

'I'm afraid it's as I thought,' he told Kala. He continued to study the flickering displays of a bundle of old oscilloscopes, all joined together by a nest of wires and – Kala felt slightly nauseated – valves. Central to this lash-up was the weapon fragment, lying on the Doctor's handkerchief and connected to the apparatus by a number of crocodile clips.

He said, 'The weapon, structurally, is little more than a molecularly engineered crystal lattice, ideal for storing and isolating certain kinds

of psychokinetic energy. This one acted as a carrier for a discrete bio-psionic energy field.'

'Bio-psionic?'

He nodded. 'A living telekinetic force with a rudimentary self-contained intelligence.'

'Oh, I see. Living?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Depends how you define living. I find it best to use the word in its loosest sense.' He finished the dregs of his tea and banged the mug down on the bench top with sufficient force to make the oscilloscopes'

circular screens fizz with static. 'As for self-contained intelligence – well, that just means it's capable of acting, and adapting its actions, within particular parameters.

Kala felt her skin crawl. To her a weapon was a weapon – a tool, nothing else. She had used smart weapons, but the kind of intelligence the Doctor suggested had no place in a device of destruction, surely. 'An intelligent weapon. . . that's horrible.'

'Yes. You should ask Fatboy about it sometime.'

'That's not the same!' Kala felt surprised and angry – not so much at the allusion to Fatboy, but because she had almost forgotten why she had come here to see the Doctor in the first place. Despite her doubts, the Doctor seemed to have kindled a tiny spark of hope that it might, just, be possible to save the day without resorting to nuking the whole area. But now her mind was spinning with the appalling nature of the device she had come to retrieve or destroy. 'All right,' she said quietly. 'This device. What the hell kind of weapon is it?'

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'I would say a rather nasty one – but they're all nasty.' The Doctor clicked his tongue. 'At a guess, it's some sort of infiltration weapon, something that could be inserted behind enemy lines, or on an enemy world, to cause havoc and destruction on a longterm basis. It's been designed to broadcast psionic energy on a particular wavelength – presumably to bioengineer the enemy, literally turning them into. . . ' He tailed off, apparently unsure.

'Into what?' she prompted.

‘Something else.’ The Doctor leaned forward, crossing his arms and resting his chin on his wrists as he studied the oscilloscopes. ‘But the weapon has made a mistake – understandable, in a sense, because it’s been damaged.

Hurt. It’s taken over a colony of wasps but it knows that controlling wasps isn’t good enough for its purpose. . . ’

To Kala, it looked as though the Doctor was trying to get into the thing’s mind – to think as it did. And that made her flesh creep even more.

‘I – I don’t follow,’ she said, speaking in a whisper. Was it her imagination or had the ambient light in the laboratory dimmed? The Doctor’s angular face was illuminated solely by the flickering circles of green in front of him.

‘The fact that the wasps have repeatedly attempted to invade human bodies indicates that whatever intelligence is now directing them requires more than insects to achieve its aims.’ The Doctor sat back and turned to face Kala, his eyes cold. ‘Where the wasps have successfully gained access to a human being, they have set about using the psionic energy stored in their bodies to begin a complete mental and physical restructuring of the host. I carried out a postmortem examination of one of the victims – the man’s insides had been turned into something totally unhuman.’

‘Alien?’

‘No I said unhuman.’ The Doctor stroked his chin thoughtfully. ‘The process had been started in Hilary Pink, but failed when he died. That’s the wasps’

biggest problem at the moment – taking over human hosts without killing them in the process, from either anaphylactic shock or straightforward coronary arrest. They managed it with Charles Rigby. But others haven’t been so successful – Tom Carlton, the verger at St Cuthbert’s. . . ’ The Doctor paused, a look of momentary anguish on his face before he added, ‘Hilary Pink.’

‘So this Rigby is our main problem?’

‘I hope so. The wasps will be busy rebuilding him from the inside out. Soon he will be completely changed, and then he will be able to reproduce more efficient methods of spreading the intelligence. He has to be stopped, and quickly.’

Kala was already reaching a conclusion. Jode had been right all along.

‘Nuclear strike. It’s the only way.’

The Doctor glared at her. ‘I won’t accept that.’

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‘Doctor, you may have to.’ How could she make him understand? ‘Your problem is that you’ve never been involved in my kind of business before.’

‘No, Kala. It’s the other way around.’ He stood up and put his coat on.

‘*You’ve* never been involved in *my* kind of business before.’

Inspector Gleave hung the telephone earpiece back on its stand and turned to face the room. His face was both grave and full of nervous excitement.

‘That was Ernest Fordyke, calling from the vicarage,’ he said. ‘He’s just seen Liam Jarrow.’

Gwen Carlton was on her feet in an instant. ‘Liam? How –’

‘He’s alive, Mrs Carlton,’ said Gleave.

‘Oh, thank the Lord!’ Gwen turned and sank into Squire Pink’s arms, half crying and half laughing with relief. There was a general murmur of satisfaction from the rest of the room, but Gleave’s face remained severe.

‘Mr Fordyke says he saw him with Charles Rigby,’ said the inspector levelly.

Everyone went silent. Anji and Fitz stepped forward. ‘Where? When?’

‘In a car, apparently. Rigby was driving like some kind of lunatic, the vicar said.’

‘That figures,’ said Fitz.

‘And Rigby had Liam with him, in the car?’ asked Anji.

‘So he says.’ Gleave lowered his voice slightly so that Gwen Carlton couldn’t hear. ‘Said the boy looked absolutely terrified.’

Fitz gritted his teeth. 'Hostage.'

'That's outrageous,' said Anji.

'Didn't you hear the man, Anji?' Fitz snapped. 'He's a maniac. And more besides.'

'We should get after him,' said Gleave. 'Fordyke said he was headed out of the village, towards the railway station.'

'Right,' said Anji. 'We'll come with you.'

The Doctor shut the old leather bag and handed it to Kala.

'What's this?' she asked. It wasn't very big, but it was heavy.

'It's called a Gladstone bag,' he explained. 'It'll be useful for carrying this around.'

He opened the bag again for her to see. Inside was a small but heavy metal canister with a control lever and a trumpet-shaped nozzle at one end. He had found it earlier after rummaging through several drawers in a vast bank of wooden filing cabinets contained in one of the alcoves leading off the TARDIS

control chamber.

'Fire extinguisher,' Kala read from the label.

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'Filed under X, of course,' the Doctor noted with a degree of ruefulness. It had taken him several minutes and a lot of irate grumbling to unearth the object. 'Not that we'll want to put out any fires with it. I've synthesised a version of the psionic energy wave from the weapon fragment, using the oscilloscope readings. I've then encoded it into the molecular chains contained in the CO₂ in this extinguisher for ease of delivery.'

'Very neat.'

'I doubt it.' The Doctor regarded the extinguisher coolly before snapping shut the Gladstone bag. 'Things could get rather messy.'

'How, exactly, will it help?' Kala felt that a direct question might – just might

– prompt a direct answer.

‘Let’s just say it might give us a slight advantage when we next meet Charles Rigby.’

Which was all very well, but didn’t explain why Kala had to carry it. The Doctor was already striding across the console room towards the exit, however, slapping the lever that would operate the double exit doors as he passed the controls. With one last, disbelieving look around the humming chamber, Kala followed him out.

They stepped straight out of the police box to find someone waiting for them.

‘Miss Havers!’ exclaimed the Doctor. ‘What a . . . surprise.’

She was standing right in front of the doors, holding her bicycle, staring down her long nose at the Doctor. She wasn’t a tall woman, which made this feat seem oddly impressive.

‘I don’t know what you two have been up to in that box,’ she declared icily,

‘and frankly I don’t wish to. But I thought you ought to know that Charles Rigby is now a fugitive from the law and the object of a police manhunt.’

The Doctor leapt forward and threw his arms around the startled Miss Havers.

‘Well!’ was all she could splutter when she managed to break free of the embrace.

‘Miss Havers!’ shouted the Doctor. ‘That’s wonderful news! Isn’t that wonderful news, Kala?’

‘Er. . . ’ said Kala, still a little amazed.

Miss Havers, who also appeared a little amazed, straightened her glasses and looked again at the Doctor, who was practically bouncing on the spot with glee. ‘I’m sorry, you haven’t been introduced,’ he gabbled. ‘Kala, this is Miss Havers, a pillar of the local community here in Marpling. Miss Havers, please meet Kala, a secret agent from the far future.’

The two women stared dumbly at one another.

The Doctor turned to Kala. 'Miss Havers is one of the people you'll vaporise with your nuclear bomb if you set it off.' Kala opened her mouth, but couldn't say anything. 'Which is just one reason why I won't let you,' continued the Doctor urgently. 'Charles Rigby is another.'

'Surely that means we really don't have an alternative,' argued Kala. 'If Rigby's at large, then he'll still have the weapon. And he's already subject to its effects.'

'But that's it exactly,' said the Doctor excitedly, grabbing her by the arm.

'While he's alive there's a chance of putting a stop to all this – without *unnecessary force*.'

'I don't understand.'

'Neither do I,' said Miss Havers.

'Don't worry about it,' the Doctor advised them. 'Just trust me.'

'I'm not sure that's good enough,' said Miss Havers.

The Doctor looked sharply at the old woman, and for a moment Kala thought he was going to embrace her again. And, judging by the way Miss Havers took a step back, so did she.

'All right,' said the Doctor, holding his hands up. 'It's like this: Rigby's infected by the weapon's bio-psionic force, and therefore subject to the will of its intelligence. That's what's driving him, although he probably doesn't even realise it. He is the weapon, and the weapon is him. The wasps are just carrying the psionic force, slaves if you like, of the device itself. But Rigby's still carrying the device around, isn't he? The actual weapon I mean.'

'It seems like that, yes,' agreed Kala.

'So there has to be a reason for that. The device is *still* important, even though it's already been activated. And that's what gives us a chance.'

'Why?'

'Because it means we can still reason with him.'

‘How?’

The Doctor hesitated slightly. ‘Yes, well, we’ll work that bit out later. But we’re wasting time here. Miss Havers –’

Miss Havers jumped. ‘Yes?’

The Doctor produced a crumpled paper bag. ‘Would you care for a mint humbug?’

‘No, thank you, Doctor.’

‘Please yourself.’ The Doctor popped one into his own mouth.

‘Doctor, you’re forgetting something,’ said Kala.

‘What? Oh, sorry.’ He proffered the mint humbugs. ‘Help yourself.’

‘Not me,’ she snapped. ‘I mean you’ve forgotten about the rest of my team.

Fatboy and Jode.’

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‘Hm,’ the Doctor mumbled around his humbug. ‘I suppose that’s them hid-ing in those trees over there.’

Kala and Miss Havers both turned to look at the trees the Doctor was nodding towards. Neither could see anything other than leaves and bushes.

‘How did you know?’ wondered Kala.

‘Those SNS suits may fool our eyes, but they don’t fool the birds.’ The Doctor gave her a tired smile. ‘That’s the only group of trees around here without a single bird in their branches.’

‘They’ll be waiting for me.’

‘I suppose you’d better go and report back to them. Tell them to hang fire on Fatboy.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think they’d like a mint humbug?’

She shook her head. 'No.'

'I have no idea what either of you are talking about,' announced Miss Havers, 'but it is obviously important.'

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, as if he'd just been paid a very great compliment.

Miss Havers paused, eyeing him suspiciously, before carrying on: 'I just wanted to say that, although I disapprove of you personally, Doctor. . . '

'Thank you again.'

'You obviously command the respect of both Squire Pink and Inspector Gleave, two men of otherwise impeccable sense and credentials. I am therefore willing, for the sake of the community, you understand, to lay aside my personal feelings on the matter and offer my assistance in whatever duty you deem fit.'

The Doctor just stared at her, apparently quite bewildered. 'That. . . is very generous, Miss Havers. And, I may say, a remarkably intelligent decision.

Congratulations.' He reached out to shake her warmly by the hand, but she stiffened and backed away. 'Sorry,' he said, with a wicked glint in his eye.

'People do say I'm overtactile.'

'Doctor!' A shout from across the green made them all turn. Two police cars had pulled up outside the Post Office, and Fitz Kreiner was hanging out of the rear passenger window of the first.

The Doctor set off at a run across the green, waving. Kala sprinted after him, leaving Miss Havers to turn her bicycle around and follow.

'Where've you been?'

Fitz called as the Doctor bounded over.

His eyes

widened slightly as he saw Kala coming up behind him. She was carrying the Doctor's Gladstone bag.

The Doctor clasped Fitz briefly by the hand; the contact was momentary but, between these two friends, all that was necessary to convey a wealth of feeling. 'What's this? A day out with the boys in blue?'

'There's been a development,' Fitz said.

'Rigby's on the loose again,' Anji added from the back seat of the car. 'And he's got Liam Jarrow as a hostage.'

A dark cloud swept across the blue of the Doctor's eyes. 'Has he now? How interesting.'

'Interesting?' repeated Anji incredulously. 'Is that all you can say? The boy's in danger!'

'But is he?' questioned the Doctor. 'Rigby could've killed him. Attacked him with wasps, converted him. Why just take him hostage?'

'With respect,' said Inspector Gleave, winding down the window of the driver's door, 'that's pretty irrelevant at the moment. Rigby was spotted heading for the station.'

'A railway station?'

'Marpling Halt. It's only about two miles.'

'We've got to stop him,' said the Doctor. 'By now Rigby will be reaching a critical stage in his metamorphosis. If he gets on board a train, he could infect every single passenger before it reaches a major city. And if that happens, the result would be catastrophic.'

'Doctor,' said Kala, 'it's too late. You don't stand a chance. Let me give the order to detonate the bomb.'

'What bomb?' said Fitz.

'Nothing, nothing,' retorted the Doctor quickly.

'She said she was going to detonate a bomb,' insisted Fitz. 'What bomb?'

Where?'

'It's really nothing to worry about,' said the Doctor impatiently. He turned to Kala. 'Now look what you've done!'

Kala raised a warning finger. 'I can't delay it any longer, Doctor. The risk is too great. I'm giving the order for Jode to nuke the place.'

'Nuke!' squeaked Fitz.

'A nuclear bomb?' exclaimed Anji. 'Here? What's she talking about?'

The Doctor grabbed Kala by the shoulders, his eyes locking on to hers. 'Not yet, Kala! Please! Just give me a little more time!'

'I want to know what she's talking about!' yelled Anji. 'What nuclear bomb?'

'What've you two been up to, for God's sake?' said Fitz.

'Jode just needs to give the word, Doctor, and Fatboy's timer is set.'

'Don't let him give the word, Kala. Please!'

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'I can't delay it any longer!' She twisted out of his grip, and he made a clumsy grab for her. She pulled away again, tears hot on her face. 'You stupid fool, you're risking everything!'

She turned to run, and the Doctor took a long step to catch up. Gritting his teeth, he brought the knife-edge of his right hand down in a quick, sharp blow to the side of her neck.

'Doctor!' Fitz shouted, genuinely shocked as Kala crumpled to the ground.

Everyone in the car fell silent.

'Well don't just sit there staring,' snapped the Doctor, lifting Kala's shoulders off the grass. 'Someone come and help me!'

After a second's pause the car door was flung open and Fitz jumped out. He picked up Kala's legs and helped the Doctor carry her over to the second car.

'Put her on the back seat!' he gasped. Together they managed to manhandle the prone body into the car.

'Don't forget my bag,' the Doctor said.

'I've no idea what's going on,' said Fitz, wheezing slightly as he

etched the fallen Gladstone, 'but you'd better have a good explanation.'

'It's really very simple,' the Doctor said, in the manner of someone rapidly reaching the end of his patience. 'If we don't catch up with Charles Rigby and find a way of stopping him infecting the whole world very soon, this woman will give the order to detonate a nuclear bomb to sterilise the entire area.'

Fitz stared back at him. 'Right. Right. Well, that's the bomb bit taken care of.' He nodded at Kala's unconscious form. 'What now?'

'Now,' said the Doctor, slamming the car door, 'we stop Rigby.'

'OK. How do we do that, then?' Fitz mimed a karate chop expectantly.

'I think it'll be a tad more complicated than that, Fitz.'

'It'll be impossible if we don't get to the railway station fast!' called Anji as she joined them. She and the Doctor exchanged a wary glance.

'Come on, then,' urged Fitz quickly before an argument could develop. 'Let's get going!'

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Chapter Twenty-five

'She's been gone too long,' said Jode.

Fatboy turned to look at him, the servomechanisms in his neck just about audible. 'She told us to wait until she returns.'

Jode grunted sourly. 'Can't understand why she had to go and see *him*, anyhow. What the hell does he know about anything? Just a damned rogue jumper, I reckon.'

'I think there could be substantially more to the Doctor than that,' commented Fatboy. 'That police box remains totally resistant to all but the most basic of my scanning parameters. I can tell you that it has travelled through time, but not how, or from when.'

'What are you trying to say?' asked Jode. 'The freak's got more advanced gear than us?'

'It's possible. Time-travel technology has developed in different ways all over the system.'

‘There’s no way he’s an offworlder,’ Jode stated flatly.

‘That’s not what I said. But perhaps there’s more to him than meets the eye.’

He’s not the only one, then, thought Jode grimly. He could just make out the tiny red light blinking on and off in the android’s frozen left eye. All primed and ready to go. Aloud, he said, ‘I don’t care who he is – he’s trouble and we should have nailed him when we had the chance. I don’t go in for all this talky-talky stuff. We came here to do a job.’ He glowered at Fatboy. ‘I mean, *you* can’t want to hang around waiting, can you?’

‘It doesn’t matter to me,’ said Fatboy. ‘My function is relatively simple, and my programming dictates my behaviour and attitude.’

‘Yeah, right,’ muttered Jode uncomfortably. He decided it was best to stay off the subject of Fatboy’s function. A part of him desperately wanted to ask, How does it feel to be a bomb? It was odd, because Fatboys had been in general military use since before Jode was born, and yet he had never felt the need to question one. It was just another weapon, a tool, nothing more. Just because a pile of microcircuitry to computer programs made him act like a human being, talk like one even, it didn’t actually *make* him one.

This whole mission had been off-kilter from the start. Kala was unreliable: she was too soft. Jode knew she had struggled to keep detached from the android, knew she had started to look on him as a team member and not

just a bomb in disguise. The business with the Doctor, whoever he was, only confirmed Jode’s worst fears: Kala simply wasn’t up to the job. She wouldn’t go through with it if it came to the hard decision.

But that was all right, now. Because the real decision had been passed to him. He had only to give the word, and the tiny clock inside Fatboy would start ticking.

‘She’s not coming back,’ Jode said eventually. ‘She’s done a runner.’

‘She said wait.’

‘Don’t you start!’ Jode barked angrily. He glared fiercely at the android.

The little light continued to pulse in Fatboy’s eye, and, eventually,

Jode had to look away.

The Doctor drove, of course. Somehow he had persuaded the police sergeant behind the wheel to let him. He hurled the big car after Inspector Gleave's, tailgating him all the way to Marpling Halt.

Anji and Fitz were squashed up alongside him on the long front seat, holding on to whatever they could to stay upright as the car skidded around the bends or leapt over hump-backed bridges like a runaway horse.

'So what's the plan again?' shouted Fitz over the engine noise.

'A great big can of fly spray, apparently,' Anji called back, tapping the Gladstone bag perched on her knees.

'It's not insecticide,' said the Doctor, crossing his arms as he spun the wheel 180 degrees and sent the car squealing around another corner. His hands flashed around as he brought the machine back under control, expertly double-declutching and pushing it ever faster. The back of Gleave's car loomed up in front of them again. 'It won't hurt the wasps themselves,' he continued, just as some kind of insect impacted on the windscreen in a long yellow smear.

Anji pulled a face. 'I hope that's not an omen.'

'Sod the wasps, said Fitz. 'They can all die a long and agonising death as far as I'm concerned. All I want to know is how the stuff works – how is it going to stop Rigby?'

'It's not "stuff"! the Doctor said as he managed a creditable racing change and floored the accelerator. The car bounded forwards. 'Well, maybe it is

– you could call it a sort of psionic spray. I've managed to come up with a formula that will carry a synthesised psionic energy wave. It's designed to counteract the bio-psionic energy contained in Rigby's wasps.'

'Which you sampled from the weapon fragment,' concluded Fitz. 'Brilliant.

Just what I'd've done.'

'Yeah,' agreed Anji dryly.

‘So what do we do, then, exactly? Just roll up and give him a squirt in the eye?’

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‘If it comes to that, then, yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘The really hard part will be catching him first.’

‘We must be nearing the station,’ said Anji suddenly. ‘I can see the track.’

The road ran alongside an embankment, and through the trees and bushes lining its edge they could see the railway lines glinting as they sped past.

‘Here it is,’ Fitz confirmed, pointing. ‘Hell, there’s a train already in!’

Gleave’s car turned sharply into the pavement outside the station, and the Doctor had to swerve in order to miss it. The car screeched to a halt half an inch from the big metal sign that read MARPLING HALT. There was a muffled thud from the rear as Kala slid off the back seat into the footwell. She let out a groan of pain and confusion.

‘Wakey wakey,’ called the Doctor.

Kala sat up, bleary-eyed. ‘Where the hell. . . ?’

‘Look,’ said Anji. ‘Isn’t that Hilary’s car?’

‘It certainly is,’ said the Doctor.

‘Then Rigby *is* here.’

‘And look at the state he’s left it in!’ the Doctor complained, scrambling out of the police car. The Bentley’s lustrous green paintwork was pitted and scratched, and the front near-side wing was horribly mangled.

Fitz and Anji hurried after him, Fitz pausing to help Kala out of the police car. ‘Take it easy, love. You’ve had a nasty, erm, fall. . . ’

Kala stumbled a little and then snatched her hand away from him.

‘Hey, only trying to help.’

She gave him a scornful look and staggered after the Doctor.

‘What did I say?’ wondered Fitz.

The Doctor had shot straight past the Bentley and into the station, where Inspector Gleave was saying, with considerable gravitas, to a ticket clerk behind the little window, ‘Police business! Let me through!’ His constable hurried to follow.

‘Hold on a mo,’ called the ticket clerk indignantly.

‘Doctor coming through!’ cried the Doctor, hurrying past the ticket clerk in the inspector’s wake.

‘Hang on!’

‘Doctor’s assistant!’ shouted Fitz as he followed.

‘Now wait just a minute!’

‘Nurse!’ called Anji, raising the Gladstone bag.

The ticket clerk had had enough. ‘Stop!’ he yelled at the next person to push through.

Kala triggered her neuro-stunner and the clerk toppled backwards without another sound.

* * *

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On the platform there was a small crowd gathering – Inspector Gleave, his sergeant, the Doctor, Anji and Fitz all bustled together, not quite knowing which way to go. Marpling Halt was really quite tiny, and almost a caricature of what Anji would have expected to find in a rural railway station: short little platform, flower boxes in the waiting-room windows, a large clock with Roman numerals and shiny brass fittings. A stout-looking guard plodding down towards the front of a long train, red flag loose in his hand.

‘There’s Rigby!’ said the Doctor, pointing along the platform to where a man was clambering into one of the carriages. He appeared to be pushing someone or something ahead of him.

‘He’s definitely got Liam with him,’ said Anji.

‘I’ll have the train stopped,’ said Gleave, starting towards the guard.

Puzzled faces could be seen peering out of the train windows at the strange little gathering. Huge clouds of steam gusted along the platform, obscuring any possible chance of spotting Rigby again. Then they all heard the guard blow his whistle, long and hard. There was a deafening hiss and a massive cloud of white steam erupted from the front of the train, drifting back along the length of its carriages and engulfing the inspector.

‘It’s going!’ cried Fitz.

Slowly the train began to haul itself forward, puffs of white rolling along the platform. The engine whistled, a long piercing shriek that made Anji yelp and cover her ears. A part of her realised that she had never actually seen a real, working steam engine before. As the engine’s tempo increased she felt her heart hammering in sympathy. Up ahead, she could actually see the engine – a huge monster of iron and steel, great black pistons turning faster and faster, heaving the immense weight of the train out of the station. Gouts of steam spewed from the funnel.

‘Come on!’ shouted the Doctor, running alongside the nearest carriage.

‘Anji!’ yelled Fitz. The bag!’

Anji suddenly remembered she was clutching the Gladstone bag, and ran after the Doctor. Kala sprinted past her, long legs eating up the platform with ease.

The next few moments were a confused blur for Anji. She passed the surprised-looking platform guard, not really knowing what the Doctor was trying to do. She hoped, prayed, that he wasn’t planning to try to jump on the damn thing before it left the station.

But, as the train puffed faster, so the Doctor increased his own speed.

Anji could see he wasn’t going to make it. ‘You’ll never do it!’ she bawled as she caught him up.

The last carriage was speeding past them, clacking and rattling along the rails. The end of the platform itself was no more than ten feet away now.

The Doctor grabbed the last door and jumped up on to the little iron step.

He unlatched the door and it swung outwards, carrying him with it, legs flailing.

‘Anji!’ he bellowed. ‘Give me the bag!’

Running as fast as she could, Anji held the Gladstone up for him.

And tripped.

She felt herself diving headlong towards the concrete. For a terrifying second all she could see was the carriage’s huge steel wheels spinning along the track. *Mind the gap!* She knew in that instant that she was going to die.

Then she lurched and swung in towards the train, crashing against the open doorway. Instinctively she scrabbled for a handhold and pulled herself inside, where she lay panting and half laughing with relief.

‘Tickets please!’ said the Doctor’s voice.

She opened her eyes to find the Doctor lying alongside her, his hair straggling wildly across his face, wing collar and cravat askew. He jumped up with a sudden exclamation of delight. ‘You brought the bag! Brilliant!’

Anji’s knuckles were still white with the strength of her grip on the heavy Gladstone bag. She could hardly believe she’d kept hold of it. When she’d fallen, the Doctor must have grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and literally thrown her inside the train.

She climbed unsteadily to her feet, straightening her jacket where it had ridden up her back, and just looked at him. She was completely agog with the stupidity of it all: him hanging on to the train with one arm and catching hold of her with the other. Pushing her in through the door. Falling in after her.

Her still keeping hold of the bloody bag.

Now he was still staring back at her with those big, worried blue eyes.

‘I could kill you,’ she told him.

‘Don’t mention it,’ he said. There was a ridiculous grin on his big face now.

He leaned out and slammed the carriage door shut, cutting off the view of the green fields whipping past outside.

'I don't believe I just saw that,' said Inspector Gleave, staring at the train as it thundered away down the line.

'Far out!' cried Fitz, punching the air.

'What's happened?' asked a plaintive voice from behind them. 'Have I missed something?'

Miss Havers tottered up to them, pushing her bike. Her cheeks were flushed with exertion. Grinning, Fitz realised that she must have pedalled all the way here from the village. 'Blimey, you don't hang around, do you?'

'You didn't leave me much choice, young man. Everybody rushing off like that.' Miss Havers caught her breath. 'What, exactly, is going on?'

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'Charles Rigby's on that train,' said Inspector Gleave, jerking a thumb at the ever more distant puffs of steam.

'Is he really? With Liam Jarrow?'

'We don't know that for certain,' said Gleave levelly. 'But there's good reason to believe that he's got the boy with him, yes.'

'The Doctor and Anji have managed to jump on board as well, though,' said Fitz eagerly. 'You should've seen it. Just like *Danger Man!*'

'Who?'

'Never mind. The fact is the Doctor's on board. With Anji.'

'I see,' said Miss Havers. 'And what good will that do, exactly?'

'Well,' started Fitz confidently. And then he ran out of confidence. 'Well, erm, well. . . '

'Wait a moment,' said Gleave, interrupting. 'Where's that tall girl in the boiler suit?'

'Kala?' Fitz looked quickly around. There was no sign of her. And suddenly he felt a cold stone settle in his stomach. 'Oh, great. Now the Atomic Bomb Girl's missing!'

The train wasn't very full. Liam allowed Rigby to drag him through

the carriages without putting up too much of struggle – largely because Rigby’s grip on his wrist was so tight that his hand had now turned purple and senseless, and because he was, frankly, too terrified even to speak.

He did make a token effort to try to slow Rigby’s progress down, the vain hope that this might actually help. He couldn’t think how, but he tried to pull back as much as possible against the man’s incredible physical strength. The problem was that Liam seriously thought Rigby would tear his arm right off at the socket if he resisted too much.

Occasionally Liam caught glimpses of people in the compartments they passed. Most were reading books or talking to each other or dozing. The odd one who actually looked up as Rigby dragged him past would have thought, on a single glance, that they were merely witnessing a stern father with a recalcitrant son. Distressing, but not really any of their business.

Rigby was breathing heavily, his lungs rasping and churning something in his throat that sounded like the result of a bad cold. Wasps floated in the air around him, and Liam had already picked up a number of stings on his hands and face. It was a measure of his terror that he hardly noticed them.

Rigby’s burned skin had hardened into a black shell, like a beetle’s. The fingers that gripped Liam’s wrist were curled black talons. Liam was beginning to get the impression that the transformation was not altogether the result of fire damage. But what. . . ?

Abruptly Rigby halted.

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Panting, Liam tried to see what the hold-up was, although he was completely in the dark about where they were supposed to be heading. Rigby seemed determined to push on regardless of destination. He was just trying to get away.

Rigby snarled, spitting wasps, and moved backwards. Liam tried to keep up, and, as Rigby moved, so he saw what lay ahead: at the junction between this coach and the next, the connecting door was open. And in it stood a tall woman with dark-red hair and wearing a one-piece coverall.

Liam recognised her instantly from when Rigby had first assaulted him and his mother at their house; this woman and her friends had

attacked him, tried to subdue him.

Rigby clearly recognised her, too, hissing and growling. Liam felt the grip on his wrist tighten to the extent that his bones started to crunch.

‘That’s far enough,’ said the woman. She was holding some sort of gun; Liam remembered how useless it had been before. What could she hope to do?

Rigby turned, pulling Liam with him, and then halted in his tracks once more.

There was someone blocking the way back. A man with long hair and a long velvet jacket. The Doctor! And with him the girl, Anji.

‘All right Rigby,’ said the Doctor. ‘This is the end of the line.’

‘Get back!’ yelled Rigby. He yanked Liam closer into him, and the boy whimpered.

‘This is where it ends,’ the Doctor insisted. His eyes never left Rigby’s, or what remained of them: cruel red orbs sitting like scabs in the calloused, black flesh. ‘It’s over, Rigby. It’s finished. Let the boy go.’

‘Leave me alone!’ Rigby shouted, his voice clogged with wasps.

There was a moment of brightness, like a camera’s flashbulb going off, and Rigby let out a choking howl, staggering forward. Liam felt a wave of dizziness pass through him as though he’d been hit on the head with a cricket ball.

Dimly he heard the Doctor shouting: ‘Kala! Don’t! A stun gun’s useless against –’

Then another voice, presumably Kala: ‘Get out of the way! Give me a clear –’

‘Look out!’

Rigby roared, swung Liam bodily around into the woman, Kala, knocking her back into the next carriage. Liam felt himself hauled up like a rag doll, utterly unable to feel a thing or even move.

The stun ray hit Liam!’ he heard someone shout. Anji, perhaps.

‘Rigby!’ thundered the Doctor. ‘Don’t do it!’

Liam wondered what he could mean. But he couldn't even open his eyes.

He felt himself beginning to lose consciousness.

'Leave the boy!' the Doctor was shouting, his voice hoarse with urgency.

'Rigby! *Don't do it!* '

Chapter Twenty-six

Rigby swung himself up on to the carriage ceiling with one easy motion, hanging upside down like a giant fly. Liam Jarrow hung from one hand like an old dishrag.

The Doctor started forward. 'Rigby! Listen to me. . . '

Rigby scuttled backwards along the ceiling, jamming himself into the space between the carriage door and the next coach. Saliva drooled thickly from his wide, wasp-infested mouth as he growled back: 'Keep away! Keep away!'

'It's me – the Doctor. I want to help you, remember?' The Doctor reached out a tentative hand towards him. 'Just let the boy go, Charles.'

Rigby hissed and then turned, ducking under the top of the door and into the next coach. The Doctor ran after him, with Anji close behind, still clutching the Gladstone bag. She couldn't understand why the Doctor hadn't tried to use the psionic spray. What was he thinking of, trying to reason with a creature like that? Was he mad?

Then they heard the carriage's exterior door crash open. For a moment Rigby was framed in the doorway, with the countryside flashing past behind him. The last vestiges of his hair flapped in the wind.

'Oh no, he's going to jump,' said Anji.

But Rigby scrambled out of the door and upwards. The Doctor was at the open door in an instant, leaning out and craning his neck to see where he'd gone. 'He's on the roof!'

‘Oh no you don’t!’ cried Anji, but it was too late. The Doctor swung himself out into the wind and scrabbled for a handhold. Hair and coat tails flying, he started to scale the side of the train.

Anji rushed to the door, trying not to lean too far out in case she fell. The track outside whizzed past at a sickening rate, and the noise was deafening.

She looked up just in time to see the underside of the Doctor’s boots disappearing from view.

‘I *knew* you’d do this!’ she screamed after him. ‘As soon as we got on this train, I knew you’d have to do this!’

‘Does he ever do anything that makes sense?’ asked a woman’s voice from behind her.

Anji turned, surprised. ‘Oh, it’s you.’

‘Kala. You’re with the Doctor, aren’t you?’

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‘Supposed to be – for what it’s worth.’ Awkwardly, Anji held out her free hand. ‘Anji Kapoor.’

Kala looked past the hand at the black Gladstone bag. ‘That’s the Doctor’s stuff. Come on, he’s going to need it.’

She turned around and leaned out of the open door. For a dreadful moment Anji thought she was going to climb out as well, but, thankfully, she just slammed the door shut.

Rigby was crawling along the top of the train on all fours, one fist still holding Liam Jarrow by the arm. The boy had stopped struggling, which made things easier. But he wasn’t going to let him go. He wasn’t finished with him yet.

He glanced back along the carriage roof and was astonished to see the Doctor following him.

The Doctor was standing in a crouch, the wind buffeting him with such force that he was constantly kept on the verge of losing his footing. The slipstream flapped his coat behind him like a black flag.

‘Rigby!’ he roared. ‘Don’t be stupid!’ But his words were carried away with the wind like leaves.

Crouching lower, he started forward. His eyes widened as he saw a huge billow of white steam rushing down the train towards him, freshly ejected from the engine ahead. It swirled over Rigby and, a second later, momentarily engulfed the Doctor in its sudden heat.

Rigby increased his pace, dragging Liam along with him.

Anji and Kala were trying to follow Rigby's and the Doctor's progress inside the train, hurrying down the narrow passage, occasionally leaning out of a window to see if they could spot them.

'They could be anywhere!' moaned Anji. She was beginning to resent Kala's automatic assumption that they were even heading the right way. What if Rigby had started towards the back of the train? What if he'd jumped off already? He and the Doctor might both have fallen off, and she'd have no way of knowing.

'They're right above us,' Kala said confidently. 'I can hear them.'

Anji was impressed despite herself. All she could hear was the regular clackety-clack of the rails.

The Doctor was gaining his balance and a measure of the wind resistance.

After a minute or so he was even able to increase his pace a little, managing a creditable jog along the train's roof. The trick was to lean into the wind.

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Rigby was fast and strong, but he was hampered by carrying Liam's body.

The boy looked so limp he might have been dead. But, if that were the case, why would Rigby insist on keeping hold of him?

The Doctor realised that he was now approaching the end of this particular carriage. Rigby had already got across to the next one and was powering ahead, but the junction between the coaches was depressingly wide. It wasn't a huge jump, but it was right into the wind.

The Doctor began to think that this idea had, perhaps, been a trifle hasty.

He increased his speed and sprang across the gap. But when he struck the roof on the other side his boots slipped on the surface and he fell. Panicking, he clutched for handholds as he slid down the slope of the roof and felt his legs whirling in empty air.

Anji saw the Doctor's boots flash past the window and, sickeningly, thought his body was about to follow. The train was now thundering past a rocky stream and, should the Doctor fall, he would certainly brain himself. That was supposing he actually had a brain of course, which Anji was beginning to doubt.

She watched, paralysed, as the Doctor's legs spun and then clambered back on to the roof.

'Come on,' said Kala, increasing her pace. Anji hurried down the narrow passage after her, already feeling a bit put out by the woman's superior attitude. But there just didn't seem to be any time to stop and sort out any ground rules.

'Get ready with that bag,' ordered Kala.

'Yes, *sir*!' said Anji, making a face.

The Doctor heaved himself back on to the central area of the curved roof, using the small air-vent housings dotted along the apex as handholds. The metal cut painfully into his fingers. He was breathing heavily, although all he could hear was the howl of the wind in his ears. His hair was plastered across his eyes, and he could feel the ends of his cravat whipping his face.

He hauled himself on to his knees and, squinting into the airstream, looked for Rigby.

He didn't have far to look. The man was standing right in front of him, already aiming a savage kick at the Doctor's face. Unbalanced by the motion of the train, Rigby kicked slightly off target, and the Doctor was able to turn his shoulder to absorb much of the impact. There was no denying Rigby's incredible strength, however, and the Doctor was still sent sprawling back along the roof.

He managed to get to one knee before Rigby came in for the attack again.

Rigby swung his foot at the Doctor's teeth, but this time the Doctor

was prepared. He caught the shoe and twisted hard. Rigby staggered back. The Doctor tried to press home his advantage, but the train was swaying and he lost his own balance as well. The two of them slammed down on to the roof.

The Doctor shook his head to clear it; the motion of the train was making him feel giddy now. But Rigby seemed perfectly at home. At least, his ability to stick to ceilings seemed to help him stick to the train as well. He leapt on to the Doctor's back and dug his fingers into his neck.

The Doctor lashed back with the heel of his boot and felt it connect with Rigby's backside. Aided by the motion of the train, Rigby toppled forward, releasing his grip sufficiently for the Doctor to pull free.

The Doctor was amazed to see that Rigby still held Liam by the wrist. Fortunately, the boy was completely unconscious.

Rigby stepped forward, burning red eyes fixed on the Doctor.

The Doctor stood, legs apart for better balance, and prepared to meet him.

Rigby's free hand slashed through the air with incredible speed, but the Doctor had seen it coming and ducked neatly beneath it. He pounded away at Rigby's exposed flank for a moment before skipping backwards out of reach.

Rigby snarled and started forward.

'This isn't really fair,' the Doctor called out over the thundering rattle of the train. 'I mean, you're only using one arm.'

Rigby lashed out again, and the Doctor dodged away, landing a couple of fast, hard punches in return.

'Let's even things up a bit, shall we?' suggested the Doctor. He tucked his left hand behind his back. Now we've both only got one arm.'

They circled each other, Rigby crouched like a giant crab, the Doctor practically dancing on his feet.

'I think I ought to warn you,' he shouted, 'I knew Cassius Clay!'

Rigby grunted as another two jabs found their mark.

'And you know what they said about him – or rather, what they *will*

say. . . ’

The Doctor stepped nimbly out of reach once again. “Flies like a butterfly, stings like a –” oh, sorry!’

Rigby surged forward, striking out wildly, and this time succeeded in hitting his opponent. The Doctor spun around, spitting blood into the wind.

‘That’s the trouble with fighting,’ he said as he wiped his mouth on his hand.

‘Sooner or later, you’re going to get hit.’

In the carriage beneath them, Anji was frantic. Judging by the muffled thuds and bangs, the two of them were actually having a fight on top of the bloody train. As far as Anji was concerned, this was taking things too far. Any second either one of them, or both, could fall or be thrown off.

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Kala glanced up and shook her head. ‘Rigby’ll kill him.’

‘I was afraid you’d say that.’

‘Open the door,’ said Kala. ‘I’ll go up.’

But Anji shook her head. ‘Don’t be daft. There must be a better way.’

‘Yeah? What?’

Anji’s mind tried to rattle through some alternative courses of action. But she simply couldn’t think of any. And, simultaneously, she saw Kala’s eyes alight on the small cord stretched across the top of the doorway in front of her. Anji already knew what the small plaque beneath the cord would say before she read it:

EMERGENCY STOP. ONLY FOR USE IN EMERGENCIES. PENALTY FOR MISUSE

£5.

Before she could say anything, Kala had reached out and yanked the cord hard.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Anji, appalled.

Kala smiled grimly. 'The only thing I can think of doing to put an end to this lunacy. Brace yourself.'

There was an enormous screech of metal brakes and the carriage physically shook. With a squealing and shuddering the entire train began to jerk violently to a halt. There was a succession of thumps and indignant yells from every passenger compartment, and both Anji and Kala felt themselves thrown forwards.

Caught completely off guard, the Doctor and Rigby were both hurled forwards along the roof as the train thundered to a stop. The Doctor hit the deck with stunning force. Rigby skidded over the front edge of the coach and disappeared with a crash.

The Doctor crawled forward and looked down. Rigby was sprawled on the couplings between this carriage and the next, but still holding on to Liam Jarrow. The boy was dangling over the edge of the buffers, and there was blood on his pale forehead.

Gritting his teeth, the Doctor swung himself down and landed on top of Rigby. Rigby responded immediately with a devastating backhanded blow.

Unprepared for the ferocity of the attack, the Doctor stumbled backwards and felt himself falling. He hit the buffers with an impact that knocked the breath right out of his chest. Gasping, he looked up just in time to see Rigby's shoe smash down on his face.

Now all the Doctor could see were stars flashing in his vision. He watched, rather muzzily, as Rigby clambered upright and wrenched open the door to the next carriage. He hauled Liam inside after him.

* * *

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'There he is!' cried Kala. She kicked the carriage door open as Rigby climbed into the next. She leapt after him, shouting for Anji to follow.

Confused, Anji started after her and then stopped when she found the Doctor lying among the heavy metal couplings between the coaches. His face was streaked with blood and dirt, and his eyes looked dazed.

'Remind me in future,' he muttered to her, 'it *always* looks easier in the movies.' She reached down and helped him up. 'Where is he?' he asked.

‘Through there,’ Anji said, indicating the next carriage.

‘Why won’t they ever just give up?’ asked the Doctor, limping through the doorway.

‘I think that Kala woman’s gone after him,’ Anji said.

‘What?’ the Doctor snapped. ‘Of all the stupid –’

Anji looked at him hard.

‘Yes, well. . . come on, come on!’

Heartily fed up with being told to ‘come on’, Anji followed him down the passage. People were beginning to emerge from their compartments to see why the train had stopped, some asking loudly what the trouble was. The Doctor and Anji offered a series of breathless excuse-me’s as they pushed on.

‘Where’ve they got to?’ wondered the Doctor impatiently.

‘Excuse me,’ said a rather large lady in a green hat, stepping directly in front of him. ‘Have you any idea what’s going on? Is there some sort of emergency?’

It was only then that she seemed to take in the Doctor’s dishevelled state, and her eyebrows shot up in alarm.

‘There’s a half-man, half-giant-wasp hybrid holding a young boy hostage further down the train,’ the Doctor told her bluntly. ‘I’d say that was some sort of emergency, wouldn’t you?’

‘I say!’ said a gentleman standing just behind the woman, who obscured him from view. ‘That’s my wife you’re talking to!’

‘My condolences, sir,’ said the Doctor. ‘Here, have a mint humbug.’

He pressed a crumpled paper bag into the man’s chest and pushed past him.

Anji smiled and skipped after the Doctor.

There was a piercing scream from the far end of the carriage.

‘Looks like our friend’s introduced himself to some passengers,’ noted the Doctor. ‘Come on, Anji, keep up!’

Gritting her teeth, Anji squeezed past yet more people. There was definitely some sort of commotion further down the train. She could hear raised voices and Rigby's angry snarls.

Kala followed Rigby into the last compartment. It was full of passengers. A woman started screaming and the men jumped to their feet in surprise. Rigby crossed to the far side of the little cabin and turned, trapped.

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'Shut up,' Kala told the screaming woman.

Rigby hissed loudly and the woman shut up. Liam Jarrow was starting to come round, moaning with pain from his crushed wrist. Rigby's black fingers had dug into the flesh with enough force to draw blood.

Kala stared at Rigby. His head was a mottled, shiny black, and his eyes were nothing more than glistening orbs of red swivelling in their sockets.

One of the male passengers who had stayed on his feet could stay silent no longer. 'What is the meaning of this?' he demanded hotly.

'Don't go near him,' ordered the Doctor, stepping into the compartment.

'He's extremely dangerous.'

'What – what is it?' asked the man.

'Never mind that.'

The man frowned. 'Who are you, sir?'

'The Doctor. Now step back and sit down. All of you. Move out of the way, Kala.'

The Doctor's tone was iron-hard and brooked no argument. Kala felt herself step aside almost before she realised what she was doing.

'All right, Charles,' said the Doctor in a much gentler voice. 'There's no way out. You're trapped.'

Rigby growled deep in his gut. Wasps were already floating around the compartment, causing some of the women to whimper and flap.

‘Keep *still!*’ barked the Doctor. ‘Nobody move!’

‘You. . . can’t. . . stop. . . me. . . Doc-tor. . . ’ Rigby’s voice buzzed through the shocked silence that followed.

‘I can, and I will,’ replied the Doctor evenly. ‘If I have to, Anji.’ The Doctor reached behind him without taking his eyes off Rigby. Anji put the fire extinguisher from the Gladstone bag into the Doctor’s hand. Her own was trembling. The Doctor said, ‘This is a chemical I’ve devised to carry a certain kind of psionic energy wave, Charles. It will cancel out the psionic energy wave that controls you, and the wasps.’

Rigby stared suspiciously at the heavy black canister.

‘I don’t know if you can understand what I mean,’ continued the Doctor,

‘but I don’t really think you want to find out the hard way, do you?’

‘Doctor. . . ’ said Kala warningly. What was he doing, giving the man a choice?

‘Be quiet, please,’ said the Doctor. His eyes still held Rigby’s gaze. ‘Don’t make me have to use it, Charles.’

Liam Jarrow let out a long groan and his eyes fluttered open. Rigby pulled him closer, and clamped a hand around the boy’s throat. ‘I’ll. . . kill. . . him. . . ’

he gurgled.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

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‘I will!’ Rigby tightened his grip and Liam’s eyes bulged.

‘Come off it, Charles,’ scoffed the Doctor. ‘You went to all the trouble of finding him. You’ve gone out of your way to keep him with you. You won’t let him go for a second. He’s your friend, isn’t he? I can’t believe you really want to kill him.’

Liam’s eyes were wide with panic.

‘Then. . . I will. . . make him. . . like me!’ said Rigby. He twisted the boy’s face around towards him and opened his mouth – the jaw impossibly widening sideways. Hundreds of wasps boiled up Rigby’s

throat and filled his mouth.

‘Go on, then!’ shouted the Doctor angrily, as Liam cringed away. ‘Do it!’

174

Chapter Twenty-seven

Liam Jarrow stared up into a sight that would, if he survived, haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life.

Charles Rigby’s jaw had opened to reveal a huge maw overflowing with live wasps. The insects buzzed and crawled all over one another, falling out of his mouth. Rigby gave an obscene, choking cough and more welled up into his mouth.

The wasps flew around in agitation, crawling out over Rigby’s darkened face and withered neck.

The train compartment was utterly silent, save for the noise of the insects.

Then, rather quietly, the Doctor said, ‘You can’t do it, can you?’

Rigby looked up at him.

‘You can’t do it to him,’ repeated the Doctor, his voice low but firm. ‘Because you know it’s wrong. It’s Liam. He’s your friend. You like him.’

Rigby shook and then threw his head back, letting out a guttural cry and a stream of wasps. Everyone in the compartment screamed and covered their heads as the wasps flew around.

Everyone except the Doctor.

He stood absolutely still, fixing Rigby with a cold blue stare. The wasps whirled around the compartment and then, almost as one, converged on Rigby once more. They swarmed around his head and shoulders, totally obscuring the monstrous features and filling his mouth. Slowly the wasps were all heading back into the gaping orifice, to be gulped down in great choking masses. Rigby’s neck and shoulders jerked and shuddered as he swallowed.

Eventually there were no more wasps to be seen, and Rigby stood hunched and misshapen.

‘There,’ said the Doctor. ‘That’s better. Perhaps now we could discuss terms?’

‘Terms?’ croaked Rigby. He still held Liam in a fierce grip.

‘Yes. This can’t go on, you know. Somehow we’ve got to find a way of bringing it to an end, haven’t we?’

Rigby glowered through red, hate-filled eyes. ‘Never! I won’t. . .

be. . .

stopped, Doc-tor!’

The Doctor blinked.

‘Let. . . me. . . pass. . . ’ Rigby pushed forward towards the door, dragging Liam with him. The boy started to struggle feebly, but the Doctor quickly held

up his hands in a placatory gesture.

Liam whimpered and bit his lip, staring into the Doctor’s eyes.

‘It’ll be all right, Liam,’ he said gently. ‘I promise.’

Liam glared back at him, mute with terror.

Rigby kicked aside the compartment door and slid out with the boy in a headlock. Liam felt himself starting to panic as Rigby slammed the door shut behind them with sufficient force to crack the glass. Despite the Doctor’s assurances, Liam knew he was going to die soon. Very soon.

‘What do you think you’re doing,’ said Kala angrily, ‘letting him go like that?’

The Doctor flashed her a dark look. ‘What choice did I have?’

‘You could have used the stuff,’ said Anji, pointing at the flask in the Doctor’s hand. ‘What in the name of hell were you waiting for?’

The Doctor took a deep breath. ‘If I use the psionic gas on Rigby now, it would kill him.’

‘So?’ said Kala.

'I'm not at the point where I can take his life just like that,' he replied simply.

His shoulders had sagged with defeat. 'Not yet,' he added quietly.

'I don't understand,' said Anji.

'There's still a part of Charles Rigby that's not been taken over by the psionic energy,' he explained wearily. 'That's why he wouldn't turn on Liam.'

'But you were urging him to do it,' accused Anji.

'I had to be sure.'

'You were testing him?' The Doctor nodded. 'That was a hell of a risk to take.' The Doctor nodded again.

'Would somebody mind explaining what on Earth is going on here?' demanded one of the passengers, who were all still sitting rigid with shock and fear in their seats. The women were sobbing into handkerchiefs. The men looked pale and frightened.

'Well. . . ' began the Doctor, but he was interrupted by Kala.

'I've had enough of this, Doctor,' she said furiously. 'You told me you could stop all this with your psionic stuff. Despite my better judgement, I was actually prepared to let you try.'

For a moment they just looked at each other.

'You blew it,' said Kala eventually. 'It's time to deploy Fatboy.'

The passengers watched the altercation in complete confusion.

The Doctor was shaking his head. 'No, Kala. . . '

'Forget it, Doctor! I believed you. I actually believed you! I should have listened to Jode all along.' Kala turned to leave, but suddenly recoiled from the door. 'Look out!'

176

The cracked glass pane was covered with wasps. They were crawling over it in such numbers it was impossible to see out into the corridor.

'Oh, no,' said the Doctor. He whirled around to check the carriage

window.

Wasps began to land on that too, a swarm of them, deliberately covering the glass.

‘They’re all around us,’ realised Anji, her voice reduced to a whisper of fear.

It had suddenly grown dark in the compartment as the wasps blanketed the windows. The Doctor, Anji, Kala and the passengers were trapped in the gloom.

‘Oh my Lord,’ said one of the male passengers, as the sound of the insects humming against the glass on either side began to fill the cabin with a terrifying clamour.

‘Rigby must have sent them to keep us in here,’ said the Doctor.

‘If that lot get in here, we’re all as good as dead,’ said Kala gravely. ‘Or worse.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Anji.

‘She means they’ll convert us like they did Rigby,’ explained the Doctor quickly. ‘But they’ve learned a lot from Rigby. It probably won’t take as long, or be as difficult, to transmute us.’

‘Oh, that’s very reassuring, Doctor. Thank you so much.’

‘So what now?’ asked Kala. ‘Break out, make a run for it?’ She looked to be tensing up, ready to try, glaring at the wasp-filled window in the door.

‘No no no,’ said the Doctor hurriedly. ‘You wouldn’t get ten paces.’

‘What, then?’

‘I’m thinking!’

At once everyone in the compartment started to panic. The men sprang to their feet, unable to contain their anxiety any longer, and the women began to sob uncontrollably.

‘Shut up and keep calm,’ ordered Kala, but she was clearly starting to get nervous as well.

‘Doctor. . . !’ said Anji. ‘Do something!’

‘ *Wait!* ’ cried the Doctor explosively, making her jump. ‘I’ve got an idea.’

‘It’d better be good.’

‘Shh, everybody!’ hissed the Doctor. The general hubbub began to quieten as the passengers turned to him expectantly. In the shadows he looked like a wild man with his swept-back tangle of hair, his collar and cravat all crooked.

Then, after the tiniest pause, he said, ‘You’re not going to like it. . . ’

‘What?’ demanded Anji.

‘You’re *really* not going to like it. . . ’

‘What?’

The Doctor licked his lips. ‘Break the window.’

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She let her jaw drop in sheer disbelief. ‘That’s it? Break the window?’

‘The wasps will pour in,’ Kala pointed out. ‘It’s suicide.’

The Doctor shook his head and held up his fire extinguisher. ‘You’re forgetting this.’

‘Are you mad?’ asked Anji.

‘Mad?’ spat the Doctor. ‘I’m absolutely furious. Why didn’t I think of it sooner? This is just the sort of enclosed environment in which the psionic wave will be most effective! Come on, break the windows! Let them in!’

Everyone just looked at him.

‘ *Come on!* ’ he bellowed suddenly, and they all jumped. As he shouted, the Doctor expertly back-kicked the compartment door. His boot smashed through the windowpane and showered the corridor beyond in broken glass and wasps. Immediately insects began to stream in through the jagged hole.

The Doctor was already pulling down a small suitcase from the overhead rack. He swung it around and then launched it at the opposite window. It went through it with a terrific crash, allowing

more wasps to flow inside.

Now people really started screaming, as the wasps poured in and filled the tiny cabin with a maelstrom of buzzing and stinging.

The Doctor hefted the black extinguisher and glanced quickly at the instructions printed boldly on its label. 'Remove pin. Aim horn. Squeeze levers.'

A cloud of grey vapour whooshed out of the extinguisher's horn with an explosive hiss.

The effect on the wasps was both marked and immediate.

Many simply fell out of the air, plummeting to the floor of the compartment and showering into the laps and arms of the passengers still sitting. Others began to mill around in a sluggardly fashion, buzzing drowsily and aimlessly, bouncing off the walls and ceiling as though suddenly rendered blind and drunk.

It's working!' the Doctor positively squealed with delight. He sprayed more of the psionic gas around the cabin until all the wasps were affected, hundreds of them dropping out of the air and forming a carpet of insects on the floor.

'*Urrgh!*' yelled Anji, still covering her head with her hands. She could feel the insects raining down into her hair.

'Right!' shouted the Doctor. 'Everyone out!'

The passengers needed no second bidding, leaping to their feet and hurrying towards the door that the Doctor had thrown open. They crunched across the fallen wasps and filed out into the corridor, quickly followed by Anji and Kala. The Doctor gave the compartment another squirt and backed out after them.

'What's the matter now?' asked Anji once they were in the clear.

The Doctor looked stricken. 'All those wasps. . . '

178

'I thought you said the stuff wouldn't kill them.'

'No, it won't. They'll be a bit dazed for a while but they should recover –

except, that is, for the ones we trod on.'

'Oh for goodness' sake, Doctor!' Anji turned angrily on her heel and headed for the carriage exit. Whether it was just a reaction to being trapped or not, she couldn't tell. But suddenly she couldn't stand the sight of him any more.

All that sympathy for a few crushed wasps, and not one mention of Hilary Pink. Taking care not to risk harming the monster that Charles Rigby had become, but allowing him to keep Liam Jarrow hostage.

She jumped down from the carriage and stumbled slightly. There were many more passengers milling around the edge of the track where the train had come to a halt. Everyone was looking confused and indignant, and some of them were getting angry.

Wiping away her tears, Anji quickly tried to put some distance between herself and the crowd. And, more importantly, the Doctor.

She didn't think she would ever understand him. She couldn't see why Fitz was so devoted to him. The Doctor just wasn't like any person Anji had ever met. Any *normal* person, with *normal* feelings and reactions.

She felt as though she couldn't trust him. And that was a horrible feeling, because he was the only person she knew who could deal with this kind of situation.

But could he, really?

Would he?

Anji stopped and leaned against a tree. She realised that she had picked up a few more wasp stings in the compartment – ugly little red swellings on her hands that were starting to itch like mad. She scratched them and that made them worse. Just as the Doctor had said it would.

There was a curious pins-and-needles feeling under the skin where the stings were beginning to really make themselves felt. And it was growing worse.

The more she thought about it, the greater the discomfort became.

And she was so tired now. Maybe it was the adrenaline leaving her system, the void that was always left when the excitement, the peril,

was over. She laughed to herself at the irony. She had once tried white-water rafting on an adventure holiday – and she had loved that rush of excitement. The feeling of cheating danger. But that was nothing compared with her life now. This wasn't any holiday. Cheating danger felt like her job, now.

Her hands were itching badly. Just my luck, she thought, that those wasps are also carrying some kind of dreaded space lurgy.

And then she suddenly felt something, something that made her stand up straight and look all around her. She didn't specifically believe in a sixth sense, 179

but this was an extraordinary sensation. Almost as if the itching in her hands was trying to tell her something.

That something was getting closer.

Something was coming for her.

Something. . .

It jumped into her vision like a huge black bat, dropping down from the sky or the tree above her, she didn't know which. After she had lost her breath with the shock, she saw what it was.

A deformed, chitinous figure wearing a tweed sports jacket and linen trousers. She noticed, bizarrely, that Rigby was still wearing comfortable brown brogues.

'Oh, God,' she breathed, utterly unable to move.

The thing gathered itself, and, with a croaking roar, leapt towards her.

180

Chapter Twenty-eight

'Where's Anji?' asked the Doctor suddenly. 'Where is she?'

He began to turn around, urgently scanning the faces that were milling all around them. More people, realising that the train wasn't going anywhere, were getting off the thing and stretching their legs. There were uniformed railway staff stomping up and down the line and glowering at the train. It seemed to have stopped somewhere in the middle of the countryside, miles from anywhere, and none of them could quite work out why.

A startled shout went up from further along the train as someone discovered a compartment full of lethargic wasps – wasps that were now actually starting to wake up and fly dozily around the cabin.

The railwayman's exclamations rapidly fell out of earshot as the Doctor picked up his Gladstone bag and hurried along the track searching for Anji.

'Have you see her? Which way did she go?' he asked Kala.

'I don't know,' she told him curtly. 'I think she headed off somewhere over there.' She made a vague gesture.

The Doctor glanced in that direction and frowned. 'I hate it when they wander off,' he murmured.

Kala stalked away, uninterested. The Doctor hurried to catch up. 'Where are you going?'

'To find Jode and Fatboy,' she said. 'I'm going to tell Jode to give the command code word that will detonate the nuke.'

'You can't,' said the Doctor, reaching out to touch her arm.

She whipped around and levelled her neuro-stunner at his forehead. 'Don't even think of trying anything,' she told him. 'Make a move on me and I'll fry whatever it is you've got for brains.'

The Doctor stood still.

'And stop looking at me like that,' she added. 'You're insufferable. I don't know what your friends see in you.'

'There's no time for this,' he said. 'We've got to stop Rigby.'

'That's what you said before,' she reminded him. 'But you're wrong. We don't have to stop him. *I* do.'

She turned to walk quickly away and the Doctor scurried after her. 'Nuking the place isn't the answer.'

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'Isn't it?' She gave a harsh laugh. 'I'm beginning to think it's the perfect answer. Blow this whole dumb area into ashes! Toast the lot of them – Rigby, his wasps, and all the stupid people around here. Including you.'

'You don't mean that,' he said, jogging sideways to keep up with her. 'You didn't really want to detonate the bomb. That's why you came to see me, wasn't it?'

'Everyone can make a mistake.'

'And the biggest mistake you can make right now is to detonate that bomb, Kala.'

She turned on him. 'That weapon – that thing that's got hold of those wasps and Charles Rigby – has got to be stopped. If it doesn't happen soon, Rigby's going to reproduce himself – that's what you told me. He's going to spread the psionic energy too far for even a nuke to wipe it out. And then nobody and nothing will be able to stop it. It'll just carry on infecting people, one after another, creating more and more of them until *it spreads around the entire planet*. That's what I was sent here to do, Doctor – save the whole bloody planet. Ever tried it?'

'Once or twice, yes.'

'Oh, go to hell.'

'Marpling.'

'What?'

'I said Marpling. We should go back to Marpling.'

She looked at him, slightly thrown, slightly suspicious. 'Why?'

'Well, at the very least, that's where Jode and Fatboy are,' he said. 'If you're serious about nuking the place, that is.'

'Of course I am.' She studied his face for a second. His expression was unreadable. There was so much going on behind those deceptively clear blue eyes. Too much, she suspected. And there was something slightly pathetic about him as he stood there in his antiquated costume, hair and cravat waving untidily in the breeze. She felt she almost wanted to believe him again.

Almost. Abruptly she turned and walked on. 'Let's go.'

'All right,' he said, apparently conceding defeat. 'Just one thing.'

She sighed. 'What?'

'Marpling's that way,' he said, pointing in the opposite direction.

Rigby was dragging both Anji and Liam across a field. They stumbled and fell as he pulled them on, Anji struggling all the while against the man's absurdly strong grip. Liam almost appeared to have given up hope, his face blank and white with fear.

Anji continued to work at getting free, but all she was doing was chafing the skin of her wrist. All this and he wants to give me a Chinese burn as well, she 182

thought. She tugged and twisted harder, though, because she was determined to break free. At the very least she had to slow him down.

Eventually he seemed to get tired of her constant fighting and name calling.

He turned and roared at her, exposing the nest of wasps in his hideous jaws once again. It had to be said that the sight did help quieten her down. The thought that at any moment he could just turn and spew those things all over her, forcing them inside her, filled her with an unspeakable dread. She felt cold to the pit of her stomach as she remembered what had happened to Hilary Pink. It was something she would never, ever forget.

And she resolved that this man, this thing, this monster, would not get away with it. Whatever the Doctor thought, she was convinced that Rigby was nothing other than a force for destruction now. And he had to be stopped.

She tugged and twisted again, trying to ignore the panic welling inside her chest.

That was what she had to do. She had to fight him. The *only* thing she could do.

He stopped and hissed at her again, his shoulders hunched up behind his head. When he turned to look at her with his huge, sore eyes, his head swivelled unnaturally. Just like that of an insect.

Then, without warning, something bulged visibly under the material of his tweedy jacket, thrusting out from the shoulder area. The jacket tore loudly and something black and shiny erupted from inside him, lashing out towards her with phenomenal speed. It folded around her, pulling her into his body and clamping her against him with unassailable force.

She tried to move, but the obscene appendage was squeezing her too tightly.

After a few seconds her eyes began to bulge. She could feel her heart pounding.

She would have screamed if she could have drawn breath.

Fitz and Gleave pulled up in the middle of Marpling. Fitz had

convinced the policeman that finding Kala was now their number-one priority, and the first place to start looking for her was the village.

‘Seems like we always end up here,’ remarked Fitz, glaring at the village green. The police car’s engine idled loudly over the sound of birdsong. ‘It’s like the centre of the world or something.’

‘For the people who live here, it is,’ said Gleave. He looked sideways at Fitz, puzzled. The boy – it was difficult to think of him as a man, even though he must have been in at least his late twenties – was clearly troubled. He looked distracted and irritable. There was a lot to worry about, to be sure, but Gleave’s instincts led him to believe that there was something more than just concern for his friends making him snappy.

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‘All right,’ Gleave said at last, switching off the engine. ‘What’s the matter?’

You’ve got a face as long as a fiddle.’

Fitz just turned to look at him. He was chewing his lip.

Gleave said, ‘I don’t know your Doctor chum all that well, but he strikes me as a most unusual sort. . . ’

Fitz smiled at this, briefly. ‘You can say that again.’

‘Yes, well, it also strikes me that he’s a man who knows how to look after himself, if you see what I mean.’

Fitz looked glum. ‘Is he?’

‘What I’m trying to say is, don’t worry about him too much. He’ll be all right, you’ll see.’

‘And Anji?’

‘Hm, well. She, too, is a pretty unusual kind of girl. But if she’s with him, then he’ll look after her.’

Fitz said nothing.

‘So come on,’ urged Gleave. ‘Out with it. What’s the problem?’

‘We’re looking for that woman, Kala, right?’ said Fitz. ‘I didn’t see

where she went in all the panic at the station.'

'And the likelihood is that she's headed back here, to Marpling, you said.'

'Yeah. And that's what's getting to me.' Fitz made a fist and thumped the walnut fascia of the glove box in frustration. 'The Doctor said something about a nuclear bomb, that this Kala bird was planning on blowing one up right here.'

Gleave scratched his head. 'Can't say I know what a new clear bomb is. . . '

Fitz stared at him. 'You saw action in the First World War, did you? You look old enough.'

'*First World War?*'

'I mean the 1914–18 War. Sorry.' Gleave looked perplexed, but Fitz hurried on. 'Think back. Do you remember what the Somme looked like afterwards?

All churned-up mud, without a single tree or building left standing? Blasted and blasted until there was nothing but. . . well, desolation.'

Gleave pursed his lips and nodded.

'Well, think of a bomb – a single bomb – that could do that kind of damage.

Only worse, much worse.'

'A new clear bomb?'

'You got it. This whole area would be blown away, burned to hell and back.

You wouldn't even be able to find the remains of Marpling. The countryside for miles around would be nothing but mud and ash. And the explosion would throw muck and earth up for literally miles.'

'I can hardly believe what you're telling me, but I'll take it on trust. What you describe is horrifying. But what would be the point?'

'The Doctor thinks this Kala girl plans to use one to wipe out Rigby

and his wasps.'

'Pretty drastic, don't you think?'

'Yes,' said Fitz levelly. 'That's why I'm worried.'

'I see. And that is why it's important we find this Kala person?' Fitz gave him the thumbs-up. 'Right,' said Gleave. 'So where do you suggest we start?'

Fitz raised an eyebrow. 'You're the detective.'

'Wait a minute,' said the Doctor. He dropped to his haunches and scabbled around in the dirt with his fingers.

They had just reached the top of a long rise in the ground, having trudged across a freshly ploughed field and clambered through a hedgerow thick with prickly thorns. Kala was breathing hard, having set herself a good pace in the hope of reaching Jode and Fatboy again as soon as possible. It seemed the train had taken them further away from Marpling than she'd given the ancient mode of transport credit for.

The Doctor had kept up with her easily, and, for the most part, remained morosely silent. She couldn't decide whether it was because he had failed in his attempt to stop Rigby, or failed in his attempt to stop *her*. The expression on his long face suggested that he just enjoyed a good sulk.

Kala, for her part, felt something that verged on a sense of relief. The decision, finally, had been made. There really were no other options left. All that remained was to trigger Fatboy and clear out.

She turned back and looked impatiently at the Doctor as he picked through the leaves and bits of bark at his feet. 'What is it?'

'Blood.' The Doctor stood up and showed her a piece a twig. There was a dark blob of something on the end. The Doctor wiped it with his finger and showed her the result – a red smear.

'How the hell did you see that?' asked Kala incredulously.

'It just caught my eye,' he said. 'It's Anji's blood.'

She blinked. 'How can you know that?'

The Doctor rubbed the blood between his fingertips and sniffed it. 'I

just know. It's Anji's. She's been this way and she's hurt.' He began to scan the horizon. 'Rigby's got her.'

'You can't know that for sure.'

'I don't have to!' the Doctor said angrily. 'It's obvious – Rigby knows I'm going to come after him. He's taken her as protection.'

'Taken her where?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I can't know everything, Kala. But it looked to me as though Rigby's transmutation must be nearing its final phase. I imagine he'll want to go to ground somewhere.'

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'Could he be heading back to the village too?'

'It's possible, I suppose. He may still think of it as home.' The Doctor picked up his bag and began to move purposefully onwards, his face drawn and anxious. 'If he hurts Anji. . . '

Kala stalked after him. 'We can't waste time looking for her.'

The Doctor looked agitated. 'Why not? I thought you said Jode had the final code word for –' Suddenly he just stopped speaking, as though someone had turned off the power to his brain. Then, very slowly, his eyes turned to look at Kala. 'What am I saying?' he whispered.

Kala licked her lips nervously.

The Doctor slapped his head violently. 'Of all the *stupid* – Why didn't I realise? You've left Jode with Fatboy. And all he has to do is give the word. . . '

and that's it, isn't it?'

'It was a compromise. . . '

'It was lunacy!' exploded the Doctor.

'Jode won't do anything until I give the order!'

'Don't be a fool, Kala! What was the point in handing over control to a trigger-happy nitwit like him?'

‘I needed time to see you!’ she burst out. ‘Jode wanted to use Fatboy the moment we lost our chance of getting the weapon back intact. Giving him the final word was my only way of buying more time. I had to see you first, don’t you understand?’

‘Barely!’

‘I *wanted* to believe there might be another way,’ Kala said. ‘I wanted to believe *you*. I should never have listened to you, but I did.’

‘There’s still a chance. . . ’ the Doctor ran his fingers through his hair. ‘How long will Jode wait for you?’

Despite her earlier conviction, Kala felt a coldness in her stomach. ‘I don’t know.’

The Doctor’s eyes were blazing with fury. With great effort, he took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down. ‘This is just wonderful.’

Kala bit her lip. ‘So, what do you want to do about it?’

‘What do I want to do about it?’ The Doctor slung the twig down and stalked past her. ‘Stop it, of course. Stop Jode, somehow. What choice do I have?’

Kala hurried after him, at a loss. ‘But your friend. . . ’

‘Will have to wait.’

‘But if she’s injured. . . ’

‘It’s not much use worrying about her now, is it?’ said the Doctor bitterly.

‘No point in trying to save her only to get blown up by a whopping great nuclear bomb, is there?’ The Doctor kicked irritably at a bush. ‘Come on!’

* * *

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They stood in the middle of the old church, lost in its silence. Every footstep seemed to echo. The scrape of their boots on the flagstones that lined the floor seemed unnecessarily loud.

‘Spooky if you ask me,’ muttered Jode. He turned on his heel and

looked around the cold stone walls, the rows of long wooden seats, and the altar.

‘Barbaric. I can’t believe people actually came to these places.’

Fatboy wasn’t looking at the accoutrements of the old building. His neck was craned so that he could stare up into the darkness of the roof space. His one remaining eye whined as it focused on the shadows. ‘Up there,’ he said.

Jode followed his gaze. There was something moving in the darkness. Lots of things. ‘Insects?’ he said.

‘Wasps,’ confirmed Fatboy. ‘Some kind of nest.’

‘So this is definitely the place, then?’

Fatboy turned his attention to the scanning device in his hand. He adjusted a control and pointed its sensor at the roof space. ‘There’s some sort of residual psionic energy up there. It isn’t natural to wasps.’

‘But it isn’t the weapon itself?’

Fatboy shook his head, the joints in his neck clicking. ‘Definitely not. But this could be as close as we get now. Those wasps are here for a reason.’

Jode, who could see the tiny red LED flashing behind Fatboy’s eye again, swallowed hard. ‘This will have to do, then. You can hide yourself here easily enough, can’t you?’

Fatboy indicated that he could. He showed no emotion at all, which Jode found suddenly disconcerting. Gathering his resolve, Jode said, ‘OK. This is it.

Kala’s deserted us – hitched up with that Doctor. She’s probably already cut out and jumped back to the future with him. So it’s up to us.’

Fatboy said nothing.

Jode licked his lips. The silence of the church was making his voice echo, as though trying to make the moment even more dramatic than it had to be. ‘Fatboy,’ he said. ‘Command code protocol: alpha Jode. Codeword two: SUCCESS.’

Fatboy responded with a single bleep.

‘Command accepted,’ he said quietly. ‘Timer running.’

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Chapter Twenty-nine

The Reverend Ernest Fordyke was walking slowly up the lane that led from the vicarage to St Cuthbert’s. He had prayed for guidance, and, when he had looked up and seen, through his kitchen window, the stout tower of the little church. . . well, he had known then precisely what God wanted him to do.

Now, brimming with God’s strength, Fordyke was determined to return to his proper place.

Besides which, the wasps couldn’t possibly remain there. If they wanted to set up a nest in the roof then they were going to be disappointed. He was going to have to find a way to clear them out. The thought of their pursuing him from the church was simply absurd, or at least it seemed that way now that he’d had time to recover. He had allowed his imagination to run away with him. Hardly surprising, given the events of the last couple of days. What with the death of the verger, and Charles Rigby’s odd behaviour.

And the business with Gwen Carlton’s young lad, he reminded himself with a tremor of anxiety. He could still picture Liam Jarrow staring fearfully out of the car as it sped past, Charles Rigby hunched over the steering wheel.

No wonder he had been frightened out of his wits.

And he had been right to contact the police. He only hoped everything would sort itself out soon. And that, he realised, was why he must return to St Cuthbert’s. The terrible things that had happened in Marpling in the last twenty-four hours would affect everyone, and he needed to be there for his parishioners.

As he crested the little hill and came into view of the church, he felt a surge of pride and contentment. This was where he belonged, and where he could make a real difference.

The church seemed even more huge and cold now. The silence was overpowering.

Jode stood in front of what he took to be an altar, still facing Fatboy.

Jode's mouth was dry. It tasted of ashes. He could hardly believe what he had done. It had seemed so simple, so straightforward, before. But now. . . all he could feel was his heart thudding away in his chest. How many heartbeats did he have left until Fatboy blew?

This was stupid. He was thinking as Kala would.

He had to get out, get some fresh air.

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He watched as Fatboy turned and walked silently away.

A jumble of

thoughts whirled around in Jode's head, thoughts he had never considered having before. What did this really mean to Fatboy? What would this mean to the people who lived here?

Jode quickly killed those thoughts. The people don't matter. Ignore them.

Fatboy doesn't matter. He's just a machine. All that matters, all that is in consideration here, is stopping the weapon from infecting the planet.

So it had to be stopped – here and now. It was his duty. He wasn't expected to like it, or even think about it. You couldn't afford to consider the consequences in an operation like this. His training told him to remain detached at all times.

Jode took a deep breath and wiped the cold sweat from the palms of his hands.

It was done now, anyway.

His only objective now was to get out and get back to the future. He could activate the temporal transduction beam from the arrival point in the woods.

His boots scratched loudly on the flagstones as he turned and walked back along the aisle between the benches, heading for the exit.

When he reached the heavy wooden doors at the rear of the church, he paused.

He could hear voices outside.

Fordyke frowned when he saw the two men standing on the path. One was in a raincoat and hat, despite its being a summer's day. The other looked like a bit of a rogue.

'Hello,' he called. 'I'm sorry, but I don't think I know. . . '

'Good afternoon, Vicar,' said the man in the hat. He had careful, but tired-looking, eyes. 'I'm Inspector Gleave from Penton police. This is my associate, Mr Kreiner. I took your call at the Pink House, about Liam Jarrow.'

'Ah, yes! How nice to meet you.' They shook hands. 'Is there any news?'

'Not yet, I'm afraid. But we're working on it.'

'Oh, I see. Good. And what, um, can I do for you, Inspector?'

'We're looking for a woman,' said the man called Kreiner without preamble.

He seemed very direct, but then Fordyke had never had many dealings with the police before. 'She's tall, thirty-fivish, good-looking. Dark-red hair. Fancy overalls. Ring any bells?'

'Er. . . '

'No pun intended, Padre.'

Gleave coughed and said, 'We have reason to believe that she might have headed this way.'

'I'm sorry. . . ' Fordyke shook his head. 'I don't think I can help you.'

* * *

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Inside the church, Jode was listening carefully to the conversation taking place outside. He had been prepared to leave straightaway, but the mention of Kala had stopped him dead.

Could he have misjudged her? Was she coming back?

These people clearly thought so. And they reckoned she was heading back here. She must have had second thoughts. Or, more likely, the Doctor had blown her out.

Jode scraped a hand over the stubble covering his chin. He wondered if this meant he should change his plans, but decided against it. He had given Kala every chance. The mission had failed because of her intransigence; the only chance left for Earth now was the nuke. And that had been left to him.

He was on his own now.

‘You won’t find her here!’ called a shrill voice from the road.

Fitz groaned as Miss Havers wheeled her bicycle quickly up the church path.

‘There’s no one in the church at the moment,’ she called out. ‘I checked in there just five minutes ago.’

‘Miss Havers,’ said Gleave and Fordyke together with varying degrees of dismay.

‘Are you haunting us or what?’ asked Fitz.

He was rewarded with a withering glare from behind Miss Havers’s spectacles. ‘I am merely trying to help the Inspector with his enquiries. And, therefore, help you to boot. So I’d thank you to watch what you say, young man.’

‘Are you feeling better now, Miss Havers?’ asked Fordyke, keen to inject some courtesy into the proceedings.

‘Never mind about me, Vicar,’ she declared with a dismissive wave of her hand. ‘There are more important things to attend. Isn’t that so, Inspector?’

‘Yes. This woman we’re looking for – goes by the name of Kala. She’s got to be around here somewhere.’

‘Maybe we should split up,’ suggested Fitz. ‘We’d cover more ground that way.’

‘Good thinking. You can take the other side of the village from here. I’ll go this way. Mr Fordyke, would you mind checking inside the church?’

‘Of course.’

‘There’s no need, I’ve already told you,’ interrupted Miss Havers. ‘I checked it myself.’

‘You can’t have,’ said. Fordyke. ‘I’ve only just got here myself.’ He gave them an apologetic smile. ‘I had to leave in a hurry earlier today – had a bit of a run-in with some wasps in there.’

* * *

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Jode sprinted back to the altar. Straight up above him he could see the wooden rafters of the roof interior. That’s where the wasps’ nest had formed. In the shadows, he could just make out the slim figure of Fatboy. He knew that the device was now fully committed to its purpose: once the arming sequence had been started the countdown couldn’t be stopped.

He checked his chronometer, calculating how long he had to reach the transduction point before the countdown reached zero. It had been intended that, should the Fatboy option become unavoidable, then both Jode and Kala would rendezvous at the original insertion point for the temporal transduction beam to pull them back to the future. But he had to forget about Kala now. It was just him.

With a final glance at the darkness above, Jode headed for the exit at the rear of the church.

Fitz was jogging around the perimeter of the churchyard looking for any sign of Kala. There was nothing to say that she *would* come back here of course, but he had to check. He had to do something. Just standing around waiting for the Doctor and Anji to come back would do his nut in. And he supposed that trying to stop someone detonating a nuclear bomb was a pretty cool thing to try to do in the meantime.

The trouble was, he didn’t think he stood any real chance of success. It was all very well haring around the village like this, but if Kala wanted to stay hidden then they’d never find her in a month of Sundays.

He tried to think of what the Doctor would do, but his brain was just whizzing round the problem uselessly. He realised that he was mistaking activity for action.

He just hoped that, if the bomb did go off, he’d be too near the centre of the blast even to know it. At least that was what he kept telling himself. And that he was sweating so much only because he was running around in the sun.

He stopped when he saw a car coming along the road towards him. It pulled up and Fitz saw that it was Squire Pink and Gwen Carlton.

‘Hello there,’ called the Squire. ‘What’s all this flapdoodle about then?’

We’ve just seen Inspector Gleave and Miss Havers on the other side of the green.’

Fitz leaned against the car. ‘It’s a bit difficult to explain,’ he said, panting a little. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Got sick of moping around the Pink House feeling sorry for ourselves,’ said the Squire stoutly, and Gwen Carlton gave a weak smile. ‘Thought we’d be better off actually doing something.’

‘I can’t stand just waiting to hear if they’ve found Liam or not,’ added Gwen.

‘I want to help.’

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Fitz looked at them both. Pink’s eyes were gleaming with suppressed grief.

Gwen’s were puffy and red with crying. Neither of them was going to be much use sitting on their own, it had to be said.

‘Look, there’s not much more any of us can do around here,’ Fitz confessed.

‘If you really want to help, I suggest we find Inspector Gleave. He might be able to think of something.’

‘Right you are,’ said the Squire. ‘Hop in, lad.’

Fitz gratefully opened the rear door and slid on to the back seat. As he did so, something caught his eye – something moving at the back of the church.

With a clear sense of *déjà vu*, Fitz remembered the exact moment that he had previously seen something very similar: standing in the back room in the Pink House, handing over a hot cup of tea to Anji. Something had caught his eye then, in just the same way, at the back of Squire Pink’s garden.

‘Hold on,’ he said quickly, twisting around for a better look at the

church.

Something flashed through the trees, a curious liquid shape against the green-ery. A human figure, crouched low and running.

He watched as it broke into the sunlight, and the strange suit the figure was wearing suddenly became crystal-clear: the drab fatigues of one of Kala's time commandos.

At first Fitz thought it *was* Kala.

But then he saw that it was actually a man, a large man. Heading out of the village at speed.

'It's Jode,' he said. 'Quick! Get after him!'

'Right,' said the Squire, releasing the handbrake. The car swerved around and sped after the running figure.

The tractor trundled along the lane at a sedate pace, its motor rattling. The farmhand driving it was momentarily startled to see a man and a woman run out of the field to his left and wave him down.

The woman was wearing some sort of overall, and the man had a long velvet jacket and a doctor's bag.

The farmhand pulled the brake lever and the tractor rumbled to a halt, gouts of smoke drifting from the exhaust pipe on its dusty red bonnet.

'Any chance of a lift?' asked the man in the velvet coat. He had long, wild-looking hair and bright blue eyes.

The farmhand glanced meaningfully down at the single metal seat he occupied. 'Not really built for passengers, is this,' he replied. He leaned forward on the big steering wheel and winked. 'What you two bin up to, then?'

'We need to get to Marpling village urgently,' the man insisted.

'Urgently?' repeated the farmhand, his tone gently mocking, as if he'd never really understood the concept.

'Oh, here,' said the woman with some impatience, aiming some kind of tool at him. There was a whining flash and the farmhand lost

consciousness.

The Doctor leapt forward and caught the man as he slid off the tractor's seat.

'Kala!' he admonished, struggling with the man's dead weight. He lowered him as gently as he could to the road.

'He's only stunned,' said Kala, clambering up on to the tractor. 'Come on.'

The Doctor glanced from the snoring farmhand to Kala, and suddenly realised he was in danger of losing his chance of driving the tractor. He released the farmer and then tossed his bag to Kala in order to distract her. As she caught it, he scrambled hastily into the driver's seat and grabbed the steering wheel.

'Hang on!' he shouted, and released the brake. The tractor trundled gently forward.

'Wow,' said Kala.

'Wait wait wait,' said the Doctor, fumbling around at the heavy controls. He found the throttle and pushed it all the way forward. With a great roar, the tractor accelerated to a fast walking pace.

'I've always wanted to drive one of these!' cried the Doctor, as the wind flicked idly at his hair.

'Mind if I get out and run ahead?' asked Kala.

Jode checked the digital compass on his left wrist. The readout gave him a clear indication of where the transduction point was. He pressed on, glad to be out of the village and into the fields. He could hardly believe that he was nearly home and dry. He estimated another half a klick in this direction would bring him to the little clearing where the team had first materialised in this time zone.

He had plenty of time, he kept telling himself, but he couldn't help rushing.

He had to get away from here as soon as possible. He realised he was terrified of still being here when Fatboy blew.

He scrambled over a hedgerow and came to a dead stop.

Right in front of him was a creature from a nightmare: it was

humanoid, but black and hunched over like some kind of giant insect. Its head was a misshapen lump, its jaws hanging wide. Hundreds of black and yellow insects were flying around and crawling all over its shiny hide. The remains of a brown jacket hung around its bulging shoulders, and, clutched to its chest were two struggling kids.

‘What the –’ Jode pulled his neuro-stunner and aimed it at the creature. ‘Get back, Ugly. I’m not in the mood.’

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He fired, once, and the actinic flash of the stunner enveloped the monster for a second. Completely unharmed, it leapt forward with a savage bellow.

Two huge insectoid limbs erupted from its abdomen, lashing wildly at Jode.

His neuro-stunner was flicked away with one ferocious swipe.

It knocked Jode backward into the mud, winding him. He rolled as the thing lunged down at him. Astonishingly it kept a grip on the two kids clutched up against its body. He realised they were held fast by other segmented limbs which had sprouted from the main torso. The creature was twisting and snarling, stumbling around as if unable to keep its balance properly.

Jode tried to get back on his feet, but one of the monster’s appendages hooked around his legs and dashed him back to the ground. Its strength was incredible. Within a second it was back on top of him, tearing at him with its shiny black legs. Jode felt sharp talons plunging deep into his flesh, and his right shoulder was simply ripped away.

He screamed. ‘No! No! Not now! You can’t. . .!’

Blood sprayed into the air and the wasps descended in a buzzing, frenzied cloud.

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Chapter Thirty

‘Wasps,’ said Inspector Gleave heavily. ‘And rather a lot of them.’

He was looking up into the roof space of St Cuthbert’s Church.

Following his gaze, Ernest Fordyke could just make out, in the cool dimness above the rafters, a cloud of swirling dots. It was difficult to be sure, given the complex lattice of wooden scaffolding stretched across the roof space, but, if he listened carefully, he could hear the low buzzing of many insects gathered in a confined space.

‘But what are they doing?’ he asked, unable to disguise the fear in his voice.

Now that he was back in the church, he could remember only too well the concerted effort the wasps had appeared to make in chasing him out earlier that day. Now they seemed content to stay up in the rafters.

‘Building a nest,’ said Miss Havers softly.

‘In here?’

‘Why not?’

Fordyke shrugged. ‘Well, you just don’t expect them. . .’

Miss Havers smiled at him. ‘All creatures great and small, Vicar. The Lord God loves them all.’

‘Er, quite. . .’

‘It’s a nuisance, I’ll grant you,’ proclaimed Gleave. ‘But that’s all. We should be outside. There’s a full-scale manhunt on for Charles Rigby and Liam Jarrow, remember.’

‘Of course,’ agreed Fordyke. ‘It’s just that I find wasps very sinister at the moment, you understand.’

‘All the more reason to get out into the fresh air, sir.’

‘Oh, don’t mind them,’ said Miss Havers, still peering up at the roof. She seemed quite fascinated, but the whole thing made Fordyke’s skin crawl. God’s creatures they may be, but he still didn’t want them in God’s house.

Rigby staggered on, his irregular, multiple limbs powering him over the ter-rain. He found he was much faster on five legs. He used the other two to hold the boy and the girl next to his segmented body, pressing them into him so that he could feel their heat through his skin.

Ahead of him was the redness – his vision was filled with the blood colour, swirling shapes and liquid textures that were impossible to interpret. In his 197

human arms he still cradled the humming black device that helped him think.

Somehow, in some way that he could not fathom, it knew what he wanted to do – where he was going.

The wasps would take him there. They were guiding him, in him, all around him. There were more of them waiting for him, calling out to him, the en-thralling hum of their minds resonating inside his head.

Faster and faster he crawled over the scarlet earth.

The air above him was beckoning, opening out like a flower. He craned his head to look up at the crimson sky, felt the need to rise up and join with it, swim in the blood.

The wasps were calling to him, summoning him. One mind in particular was waiting for him, clearer and louder than all the others. The device in his arms hummed more fiercely than ever.

He paused, quivering, his hard legs holding him fast against the ground.

The wasps were working inside him again, working with him, changing things. His body had already separated into two halves joined by a tiny waist.

Now the flesh of his upper back was tingling and fizzing with their energy.

Anji was locked against the underside of Rigby's body. If she twisted or moved at all, he increased the strength of his grip to a point that threatened to snap her ribs like matchsticks. Her face was pressed into something soft and musty-smelling, which she had identified as the remains of Rigby's jacket. She could see the glossy black of his skin beneath it.

And, only a few inches away, Liam Jarrow's terrified features were clamped hard against the same toughened hide. A massive, insectoid limb pinned him there. Liam's brown eyes had become completely glazed over with fear; they were staring straight at her but she couldn't tell whether he was seeing her or not.

He was probably still in shock after witnessing the brutal, bloody murder of the man in the field. Anji had squeezed her eyes shut, but she could still hear the man's screams echoing in her memory.

Rigby paused in his mad, headlong rush. Anji felt his body, trembling. She fancied she could hear a deep, reverberating hum coming from within him.

Then she felt the legs relax fractionally, and she quickly switched position so that she could breathe a little more easily, and maybe even see where they were headed.

She sensed the creature's body shaking, felt its heavy vibration. Something was happening. Then, with a noise like popping plastic and a terrible, ecstatic groan from Rigby himself, something sprouted from his back.

The rags of his sports jacket parted as something jerked out of the ruptured flesh beneath, trailing slime and wasps. A web of thick black veins was ex-198

panding as blood rushed through them, stretching out a membranous flap of skin into a long, stiffening blade.

Oh my God, thought Anji miserably. He's growing wings.

The tractor ploughed straight through the gate, the old wood splintering with a crack sending splinters flying everywhere.

'Whoops!' cried the Doctor, bouncing in the driver's seat as the farm vehicle jerked and rolled over the uneven ground. 'I'm sure that's against the Country Code.'

Kala gritted her teeth and hung on for dear life, her fingers digging deep into the black velvet of his sleeves. If she was hurting him then he wasn't showing any sign of it. She hoped she was. 'This is insane!'

'It's still our best bet for cutting across the fields!' the Doctor called back over the rumble of the engine. The tractor was shaking them wildly as it traversed the ploughed-up mud, its huge rear wheels spraying clumps of soil high into the air around them. 'Look over there!'

The Doctor rather recklessly let go of the steering wheel with one hand to point ahead. Kala caught a glimpse of a stubby building poking up above the trees as it bounced around in her view.

‘That’s St Cuthbert’s,’ the Doctor yelled. ‘Not far now!’

He was actually grinning. Kala dug her fingers in harder, determined to make him suffer. She had never been so uncomfortable in her life. Bits of mud, flung up by the tractor’s huge rear wheels, kept hitting them as the machine rattled onwards; the Doctor’s face was speckled with the stuff.

Eventually they reached the far side of the field, but there was no sign of a clear exit. The Doctor hauled the wheel around, turning the tractor sharply to the right.

‘They can turn on a sixpence, these things,’ he told her enthusiastically.

At that moment one of the front wheels hit a tree stump buried in the mud and the steering wheel twisted right out of the Doctor’s hands. The tractor stalled and jerked to a halt, throwing them both out of the metal seat to land heavily in the mire.

Kala rolled with the fall and sprang to her feet, only to find that the Doctor was already upright and helping her to stand. ‘This way,’ he said, grabbing her by the hand and pulling her after him.

‘Pull up here,’ said Fitz. ‘Please.’

Squire Pink dutifully stopped the car, a wry smile on his lips. In some ways Fitz Kreiner reminded him of Hilary – the same disgraceful lack of manners, the same insouciance. Approaching the same age, too, probably. A wave of sadness washed over him as he remembered his brother, but it was a sensation 199

that he could not afford to indulge in now. He forcibly ignored the heavy feeling in his chest and turned to look at Fitz.

‘Is this where he went?’

Fitz nodded, getting out of the car. ‘Through the fields,’ he said, ‘I’m sure of it. It’s the only way he could have come.’

They had trailed the running man – Pink thought of him as a phantom, but one that was solid and real – all the way from the village to this point. They would have to follow on foot now, though, so the Squire climbed stiffly out of the car as well. ‘Which way now?’

Fitz led him down a dirt track that gave on to a field. He pointed at

the mud. ‘Look – boot prints.’

‘He can’t be all that far ahead of us,’ realised Pink.

Fordyke coughed politely to attract Miss Havers’s attention. She seemed to be lost in some kind of trance. He suspected it was shock, a delayed reaction to the events of the last day or so, and not entirely unexpected.

‘Miss Havers?’ he prompted. They were sitting together on a pew near the front of the church. Fordyke had wanted to pray, but Miss Havers seemed interested only in staring up at the roof.

She blinked and turned to look at him, rather curiously, almost as if she didn’t at first recognise him. Then she gave him a nervous smile. ‘Vicar?’

‘I think we should leave,’ Fordyke told her gently.

‘Whatever for?’

‘The wasps,’ he said. ‘I’m a little worried about us being in here with that nest. If they were to attack. . .’

She laughed. ‘Don’t be silly, Mr Fordyke.’

‘I assure you, I have no wish to appear foolish. But we both witnessed the unfortunate fate of Mr Williams only yesterday, did we not?’

Miss Havers shook her head. ‘This is St Cuthbert’s, Vicar. What could possibly harm us in here?’

Fordyke glanced anxiously back up at the shadowy space above them. He couldn’t easily see the wasps, but he could hear them clearly enough. And sense them. An unnatural malevolence – something indefinable that made him shiver.

All at once something made the wasps stir. He heard the buzzing grow suddenly louder, more intense. He could detect a visible increase in the activity in the rafters. Something had got them going!

‘Come on,’ he said firmly, ‘we’re going outside.’

‘But. . .’

‘I insist, Miss Havers. Come along!’ He stood up and helped her to her feet. The poor dear was really quite badly shaken, he realised. As gently as he could, he steered her towards the exit.

They found Jode lying at the edge of the field, his camouflage suit defaulted to a drab grey colour and soaked with blood. A number of wasps were drifting around the carnage.

‘Dear Lord,’ breathed Squire Pink as he stepped closer. ‘What happened to him?’

‘Rigby must have been this way,’ muttered Fitz, waving some wasps away from the body.

‘But he’s been attacked – mutilated. . . ’

Jode’s body was crumpled awkwardly, and there was a terrific wound to the right shoulder. Through the tear in the fabric of his fatigues, Fitz could see torn muscle and a dash of white bone. A number of wasps had settled to feed on the meat.

‘Don’t touch him!’ ordered a familiar voice.

‘Doctor!’ cried Fitz, jumping up as his friend walked towards them. ‘Where did you spring from?’

‘It’s a long story,’ said the Doctor, handing over a battered-looking Gladstone bag.

Then Fitz saw Kala. ‘What’s she doing with you? And where’s Anji?’

‘There’s no time for explanations, Fitz,’ the Doctor insisted, kneeling down by Jode’s body. Ignoring his own advice, he gingerly felt the bloodied flesh of the man’s throat for a pulse. ‘He’s still alive.’

‘Thank goodness for that,’ said Kala.

‘No,’ the Doctor brutally contradicted her. ‘Not really. Alive, this man is now an incubator for the wasps’ psionic energy. Look.’

Among the remains of Jode’s face, they could all see the wasps crawling into his mouth and nose. Jode began to gag, the muscles in his throat convulsing, forcing the wasps down. Still more were congregating in the open wounds, lapping up the blood and busily working their way into the raw tissue.

‘He’s going to turn into another Rigby?’

‘I’m afraid so, Fitz.’

‘There must be something we can do,’ said Kala, watching in cold horror as more insects squirmed between Jode’s lips.

The Doctor shrugged. ‘We could help him on his way, perhaps. . . ’

‘Doctor!’ Fitz was shocked, but the Doctor rounded angrily on him.

‘You don’t understand what’s at stake, Fitz! Soon the creature that was once Charles Rigby will physically split into several different creatures – each capable of exactly the same feat of reproduction. Like individual cells splitting 201

up, again and again. And each of those creatures can spread their psionic energy to other living things, like Jode here. And the process starts all over again. Unless it’s stopped now, Rigby – and Jode – will start to reproduce *uncontrollably*. And that puts the entire planet in danger!’

Fitz looked back down at Jode and swallowed hard.

Jode’s eyes flickered open, slowly focusing on the faces above him. He coughed out some wasps and, when he saw Kala, said, ‘Thought. . . you’d. . .

gone. . . ’

‘No, I’m here,’ she said. ‘Don’t try to talk.’

Jode shook his head, a painful smile forming on his lips. ‘Doesn’t matter now. Only hope was to detonate Fatboy. . . sterilise the entire area, like we agreed. . . ’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, shaking his head. ‘No.’

Jode smiled. ‘I’ve given. . . Fatboy. . . the command code word. The countdown’s already begun. It’s too late for Rigby now. And too late for you.’

The Doctor’s teeth ground together. ‘How long?’

Kala snatched up Jode’s wrist and checked his chronometer. ‘This should be linked to Fatboy’s timer. . . ’

‘Well?’ prompted Fitz.

She looked up at them, ashen-faced. ‘We’ve got thirty-four minutes until the nuke goes off.’

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Chapter Thirty-one

‘Thirty-four minutes,’ repeated the Doctor. ‘Just over half an hour to find Rigby, stop him, recover the psionic device and then find the nuclear bomb and defuse it.’ He looked at the others. ‘Shouldn’t be too difficult, should it?’

‘It can’t be done,’ said Kala dully. She couldn’t respond to the glib humour.

She was utterly shocked. She didn’t even feel any fear – just a terrible numb-ness seeping through her body and mind. And one thought kept overriding everything else: *the transduction point! Get back to the transduction point!*

‘She’s right,’ Fitz said thickly. ‘She’s right. We don’t have enough time. We don’t even know where the bomb is, for Pete’s sake!’

The Doctor shook his head, refusing to give in. When he spoke, the words rushed out in a torrent of precise reasoning. ‘No. Until the bomb actually goes off, there’s still time to find Rigby’s device. That must still contain a large part of the weapon’s bio-psionic energy source, if the fragment we found is anything to go by. And that *must* be of some use. . . ’

‘But the bomb, Doctor!’ Fitz insisted.

‘Any bomb can be defused, Fitz.’

‘But there isn’t enough time!’

Kala was shaking her head. ‘It just can’t be done, Doctor. There isn’t a countermand order. Once the timer’s started, that’s it.’

‘We’ve got to try,’ the Doctor maintained.

‘It’s impossible!’

‘I *hate* that word!’

For a moment there was silence. The Doctor’s eyes were shining with an absolute refusal to give up hope. Kala could see him looking at Fitz

– looking at his friend for support, and, at the same time, filling Fitz with exactly the same resolve. Fitz knew the Doctor; he believed in him. Kala felt a dizzying wave of hope rush through her as well.

‘All right,’ mumbled Fitz. ‘What do we have to do?’

‘We need to know where the bomb is first,’ said the Doctor. He knelt back down by Jode. ‘Where is he, Jode? Where’s Fatboy?’

‘You won’t find him,’ wheezed Jode. ‘You’re all screwed.’

The Doctor grabbed the front of Jode’s collar and roughly pulled him up.

Tell me where he is!’

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Jode coughed, blood running down his chin. Some wasps crawled out of his sagging mouth as he gasped, ‘You’re too late, Doctor. . . ’

‘Tell me!’ roared the Doctor. He pushed Jode down hard into the mud, and the man groaned in pain.

‘You can’t make me,’ Jode whispered. ‘The wasps have taken hold. . . I’m already dying. The nuke’s all I have left to look forward to!’

The Doctor’s face grew black with anger. He gripped Jode by the shoulders and the man gasped. ‘Tell me where Fatboy is,’ the Doctor ground out.

Jode’s eyes were bulging in their sockets. ‘Go to hell,’ he croaked.

‘All right, Doctor, that’s enough,’ said Fitz, gently pulling the Doctor away.

Jode gave a last, rattling cough and then slumped. More blood, lifeblood, streamed out of his mouth.

‘He’s dead,’ said Kala.

The Doctor let out a hiss of frustration. Then he suddenly moved, grabbing Jode’s limp arm and tearing the big chronometer from its wrist. He inspected the dial. ‘Thirty-two minutes,’ he said tightly. He turned to Kala. ‘You said there isn’t a countermand order. There must be some other way to stop him detonating.’

‘No, there isn’t. Fatboys are a last-resort weapon. Once they’re armed and the countdown’s running, that’s it. There’s no way back.’

The Doctor rubbed vigorously at his temples, as if trying to spur his brain on. ‘Is he still aware?’

‘Yes, but his primary intelligence unit will be overridden by the bomb’s computer. While the timer’s running, he will be programmed to resist any attempt to disarm or disable him.’

‘Wonderful. A bomb that will fight off any attempt to defuse it.’

‘The last four minutes of the countdown are crucial, though,’ Kala continued. She was almost paralysed with fear, feeling that she couldn’t talk quickly enough. ‘All the available motive power is rerouted to prime the detonator.’

The computer shuts down everything but the nuclear device itself.’

‘A four-minute warning,’ said Fitz.

But the Doctor’s eyes had narrowed. ‘So he can’t fight back during those last four minutes?’

‘No.’

‘Doesn’t give you long, Doctor,’ warned Fitz.

‘Thank you, Fitz.’ The Doctor looked rueful, but there was a steely determination in his voice. ‘It does give me a chance, though.’

Kala shook her head. ‘We don’t even know where he is.’

The Doctor looked down at Jode’s corpse again, as if he thought the man might suddenly come back from the dead and tell them what they needed to know. Then, very slowly, he lifted his left hand and looked at his fingertips.

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Jode’s blood was still drying on them. He closed his hand into a fist and shut his eyes tightly.

Fitz was biting his lip as he watched the Doctor. It had occurred to him that the Doctor may have been deliberately hurting Jode in the hope of forcing the information out of him, but he had discounted the idea almost immediately.

It had been accidental. Hadn't it? Not even the Doctor looked sure now. Not knowing what else to do, Fitz clasped his friend's shoulder reassuringly.

'Thanks,' whispered the Doctor.

Fitz coughed and said, 'Actually, I was trying to remind you that we've only got half an hour left. It's time to put your heavy-duty thinking cap on.'

The Doctor smiled at him. 'Never say die, eh?'

'Never.'

The Doctor checked Jode's chronometer again. 'Thirty minutes. . . '

The flight was terrifying in itself; Anji instinctively grabbed hold of the remnants of Rigby's jacket even though he still held her fast with his insect legs.

Through slitted eyes she caught worrying glimpses of sky and land, alternate flashes of blue and deep green. Occasionally she caught a glimpse of a narrow road, or even a building, and she realised with dizzying terror just how high they were.

Rigby's new wings were silver blurs, thrumming like helicopter blades as he zigzagged wildly through the air. Anji couldn't tell if he was flying so erratically because he was new to it, or because this was how insects always seemed to get about.

He'd risen jerkily and set off in a direction that meant nothing to Anji
—

until she caught a glimpse of Marpling village green beneath her. He seemed to alter course slightly then, veering sharply one way. He appeared to have a definite destination in mind. Anji was too disorientated to work out where he was making for.

As he changed direction, he flexed his huge insectoid legs – presumably to change his grip on Anji and Liam. She shrieked as she slipped down, grabbing hold of the rags of his jacket even more tightly, as, for a long moment, she hung beneath him, legs cycling uselessly in thin air.

She heard Liam shouting something, felt his hand fasten on her arm.

Her eyes were tight shut. She expected to plunge suddenly down, with nothing between her and the ground except about two hundred feet of empty space.

Then Rigby renewed his grip, the legs bunching in under his body, gathering his charges closer.

Anji breathed again, in short panicky gasps.

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How stupid is this? a part of her thought madly. Kidnapped by the Wasp-man!

Rigby cut his way through the blood air, rejoicing in the power of his flight.

The wings felt so good, as if they'd always been there. As if they were meant to be there.

Around him, the sky and the land revolved in a kaleidoscope of red and purple. Ahead of him was the ruby glow he craved, the home of his fellows.

He would be safe there. He could finish growing there. If he didn't stop soon, the pain would become too much to bear.

He wanted to finish the transformation, just so that the pain would stop.

He just wanted it to be over now.

He pushed on, harder, renewing his grip on the humans. They were a nuisance, but they were necessary. He had to make them like him. But he had to do it properly, and he needed to be somewhere safe and quiet to do that.

His wasps were waiting for him there.

But he wanted more. He wanted them all around him, ready to help, to cover him in their cold little bodies, to bathe in their masses.

He called out to them as he flew on.

Come to me! Come to me!

There was a sudden rush of activity from the ground as the wasps

swarmed away from Jode's cooling flesh. The insects rose in a dark cloud, swirling up into the blue sky.

'They've realised he's dead,' explained the Doctor. 'No more use to them.'

Wait! Which way are they heading?'

He set off at a run across the field, watching the swarm as it surged and eddied through the sky.

The others started after him.

'Where are they going?' the Doctor called out again.

'They're heading back towards Marpling,' said Squire Pink.

The Doctor skidded to a halt. 'Of course! They'll be going straight back to Rigby!'

'What about the wasps' nest in St Cuthbert's?' wondered Fitz. 'There's one there, according to the vicar.'

'What? Why didn't you tell me before?'

'I only just found out before! A lot's happened since then!'

'It's a lair,' said the Doctor. 'It has to be! That's why Rigby made straight back towards here after he left the train. It wasn't the village he was after – it was the church!'

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Fitz looked worried. 'Inspector Gleave and the others are already there, Doctor.'

'Then they're in deadly danger.' The Doctor started running. 'Let's go!'

'But what about the bomb?' asked Kala, hurrying after them.

'Wait a second!' cried Fitz. 'That reminds me! I've just thought of something else!'

The Doctor stopped and waved Jode's chronometer at him. 'This had better be good, Fitz.'

'That's where I saw Jode – running out of the back of the St

Cuthbert's!'

Fitz was grinning like a fool. 'We followed him here – but he must have been *inside* the church!'

'Fatboy,' breathed the Doctor. 'He left Fatboy in there! He must have realised it was going to be Rigby's bolt hole. . . '

'Yes!' Fitz congratulated himself heartily, and the Doctor was grinning from ear to ear as well.

'Well what are we waiting for?' bellowed Squire Pink. 'It's not over yet!'

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Chapter Thirty-two

In the dark space, they came to him. They numbered in the thousands, swarm-ing around in the red-black dimness so thickly that he couldn't see anything else.

The wasps flew to him, covering him, crawling over his hardened flesh, crawling over each other. They descended on the lair in droves, buzzing and humming, filling his mind with their thoughts and instincts.

Rigby raised himself up, opening all seven of his legs to welcome the horde.

They coated him, stroked him, covered him.

They worshipped him.

It felt good. Even the pain felt good. It coursed through him, right inside him, deep down where his flesh was soft and sweet. He welcomed them inside him, opening his jaws wide for them so that they could pour into him unhindered. They pushed and shoved and jostled with each other, all wanting to become one with their master.

Rigby felt them inside him, felt them scurrying around, tickling and stinging him. It felt glorious. He exulted in the sensation of their myriad bodies covering him and filling him. He felt parts of him changing again, gorged with wasps, swelling and re-forming as they worked at him.

The end was near now. He was nearly complete. He could feel the

energies and the life inside him splitting and dividing, forcing the metamorphosis to its inevitable conclusion.

And inside his brain, in the organ that had once been a mass of grey-coloured cells but now resembled little more than a pustule of yellow tissue, a tiny spark began to fade. A tiny spark that held the last remnants of Charles Rigby's thoughts.

A tiny spark that flashed, however briefly, with the final agonies of his tragic journey.

No! Please, for the love of God! Stop it! Make it stop!

Squire Pink's car skidded to a halt in front of St Cuthbert's, leaving tyre marks stretching right up to the old lych gate. The rear doors were already open, with the Doctor and Fitz hanging out, ready to jump down and hit the ground running before the vehicle had fully stopped.

They sprinted together up the path through the little cemetery, the Doctor's coat tails flying.

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The Squire and Kala followed, although Pink was older and heavier and less able to keep up.

But Kala was holding back for another reason altogether: she knew there was very little time left now. There wasn't anything anybody could do.

But she might, just, be able to reach the transduction point from here before Fatboy blew.

She could be snatched away from here in the blink of an eye.

Safe. Alive.

Kala slowed down, hesitating on the threshold of the church. The stout wooden doors stood open, but the interior was dark. She realised the doors represented a turning point for her: she should just turn around and go, right now. There was still time for her to reach the transduction point. To wait any longer was a terrible risk.

She could leave this old, filthy place behind. Whatever happened now, nuclear blast or no nuclear blast, it wouldn't affect her in the future.

Would it?

Inside the church, Inspector Gleave was introducing the Doctor to the Reverend Ernest Fordyke.

‘He’s something of a specialist,’ the policeman said.

‘Oh, good!’ responded Fordyke uncertainly, glancing at Miss Havers. She was still sitting in the pew, apparently meditating. I’m quite concerned about her, actually,’ he told them *sotto voce*. ‘She seems to have lost all her fire. I think it’s all been a bit much for her.’

‘I’m sorry?’ said the Doctor impatiently, continually glancing up at the rafters.

‘It’s Miss Havers,’ whispered Fordyke. ‘You’ve come to see her, haven’t you?’

‘See her?’ exploded the Doctor, his voice echoing around the church. He immediately switched to a sharp whisper: ‘I’m here to find a nuclear bomb, Vicar!’

‘Bomb?’ Fordyke looked quickly around, as though expecting to find one lying on a pew or propped up against the pulpit. The Doctor simply pushed past him with a hiss of annoyance, still peering up into the gloomy recesses of the roof space.

‘Wasps,’ he said to Fitz. ‘You can hear them.’

‘Yeah – but where’s the bomb?’

‘And where’s Rigby?’ The Doctor turned on his heel, still glaring upwards.

‘Up there, you reckon?’

‘In among all the woodwork and ladders?’ mused the Doctor softly. ‘It’s perfect.’

* * *

‘Liam?’ Anji said the name as quietly as she could, but she needn’t have worried. The noise of the wasps up here was immense, a wall of sound reverberating through her skull. But, whatever happened, she didn’t want to attract the attention of the thing on the other side of

the dark space they shared.

She risked another glance at Rigby's shadowy form. She couldn't see it very clearly, and for that she was thankful. But by the faint beams of light that crept in through some of the gaps in the walls, picking the creature out like miniature spotlights, she could see that he no longer resembled anything like a human being.

He was bent over, his head slung low, eyes like giant clots of blood on either side. A multitude of irregular, segmented legs quivered underneath him. The wings, which weren't like insect wings at all but resembled those of a bat, with the flesh stretched over a network of fattened veins, were folded down behind him.

But worse than that were the wasps. They filled the darkness, crawling everywhere, over her and over Liam. But most of all over Rigby. They were literally covering him, a thick, teeming crust of the things which obscured everything but the shape of him from view.

And, as she watched, Rigby – the thing that had once been Charles Rigby

– reared up and threw back its insectoid head, opening its sharpened jaws sideways to reveal a glistening maw full of quivering pink flesh – flesh that was utterly, unmistakably human.

And then the wasps poured in, a foaming mass of them, fighting one another to get inside. The terrible throat was quickly hidden from view as the swarm filled the orifice. She watched the creature chugging the things down for as long as she could stand it. Then she had to look away again, feeling herself beginning to shake. The suffocating stench up here was being made more unbearable by the enclosed space. She had to get out.

‘Liam!’

This time the boy opened his eyes – but not very much, as though he was too scared to peek at what might be out there. And he was probably right to do that.

But Anji was damned if she was going to witness all this on her own.

‘Liam, it's me,’ she hissed. His eyes focused slowly on her in the gloom. ‘Are you OK?’

Daft question, Anji. But what else was there to say?

He didn't even nod or shake his head. He just looked at her. There was nothing behind his eyes – not a hint of life. And that, more than anything, frightened her. He'd been through too much. He'd given up.

How much more could she take before she did the same?

* * *

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'Right,' said the Doctor, clapping his hands for attention. The noise reverberated around the nave like a pistol shot. 'Everyone out!'

No one moved.

'I said everybody out!' he repeated, making exaggerated shooping motions.

'Whatever for?' asked Fordyke, not, he felt, unreasonably in the circumstances.

Fitz said, 'If that nuke goes off, Doc, there won't be much point in stepping outside and crouching down behind a car, will there?'

'It's not the nuke I'm worried about, Fitz! Well, I mean it *is*, but there's also Charles Rigby to think about.' The Doctor ran a hand quickly through his hair in exasperation. 'All these people are in terrible danger, one way or the other.'

I don't want to save them from a nuclear explosion only to find they've all been converted into wasp monsters.'

'Wasp monsters?' queried Fordyke tremulously.

'Yes, exactly, Mr Fordyke,' said the Doctor, advancing on him with madness in his eyes. 'So, unless you want to find out at first hand what it's like to be forcibly turned into a giant mutant insect, I suggest you *all clear out!*'

'Best do as he says,' advised Fitz.

'Oh,' said Fordyke, 'I see. . . ' He nodded once to show that he had understood; this Doctor fellow clearly needed humouring.

'He means it, Vicar,' said Gleave. 'Everyone out. Now.'

'Come along, Miss Havers,' said Fordyke. 'It think we'd better do as

we're told.'

Miss Havers stood up rather stiffly and turned to look at him. She didn't say anything.

'Is everything all right, Miss Havers?' Fordyke asked, hesitating. She looked rather unwell.

'She is a bit quiet,' murmured Fitz.

Fordyke reached out and gently took her by the hand. He was startled to find her fingers cold and clammy. 'Come along, Margaret,' he said softly.

'Wait a minute,' said the Doctor, crossing the space between them in two quick strides and pulling Fordyke away.

Miss Havers's mouth stretched open and, with a loud hiss, a fountain of wasps erupted from her throat. The Doctor ducked, throwing himself and Fordyke to the ground, as the insects streamed overhead.

The wasps descended on the next available victim: Kala. She staggered back, clutching at her head as the insects congregated on her face.

'Bloody hell!' yelled Fitz.

The Doctor rolled to his feet, glaring at Miss Havers. 'And to think I hugged you!'

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She twisted around and spewed more wasps at him. He dived to one side, but the wasps followed him with a maddened determination.

'Fitz!' he cried, arms flailing. 'The bag!'

Fitz wrenched open the Gladstone and took out the fire extinguisher. He threw it across to the Doctor, who caught it and immediately hit the activator.

Thick white gas jetted from the nozzle with a harsh roar. Turning right around on his heel, the Doctor sprayed the vapour all around him. The wasps buzzed frantically and spun away, some of them dropping right out of the air to land on the floor and pews, where they twitched and vibrated in a blur.

Miss Havers had launched herself at Kala, fingers clawing at her

throat.

They went down together in a maelstrom of wasps, Kala kicking and fighting like a cat. She didn't make a sound, however; to do so would mean opening her mouth, and the wasps were already trying to get inside her. Some were already wedged up her nostrils.

The Doctor was on his feet in an instant, stepping over the women and blasting them both with the psionic spray. The vapour enveloped them all in a seething fog. For a minute they were all obscured from view.

Then the cloud began to disperse, revealing the Doctor standing over two bodies. He bent down and helped Kala to her feet. She was shaking, swiping at her face with her hands and forearms to dislodge the remaining wasps. The Doctor rubbed her hair vigorously to get rid of the ones lodged there. Then he helped to lower her into a pew, where she sat sobbing and gagging.

'Are you all right?' he asked her urgently. She nodded, choking.

Miss Havers lay huddled on the floor, wreathed in the grey haze of the Doctor's psionic gas.

'What the hell!' said Fitz. 'How did *that* happen?'

'She must have been infected already,' panted the Doctor.

'Right at the beginning,' said Fordyke in slow realisation. 'She met Charles Rigby. Then she came here. I thought she was suffering from shock!'

'But there was no sign of anything wrong with her,' Gleave pointed out.

'It's as I said,' the Doctor explained. 'The wasps learned an awful lot from Rigby. They only had to make one successful invasion – and then they must have been able to stay dormant inside her.'

'Were they controlling her?' asked Fitz.

'Probably. That's why she's been following us around so much, I imagine.

She's been Rigby's eyes and ears.'

'That's why she came back here,' said Fordyke. He was pale and trembling.

‘Because the wasps were here.’

‘Preparing the way for Rigby,’ the Doctor confirmed.

Gleave frowned. ‘But she tipped us off that Rigby had survived the fire.

Why do that if she was on his side?’

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The Doctor shrugged. ‘Maybe the wasp control wasn’t total. Maybe she was confused – didn’t really know what she was doing. It must’ve been terrible.’

They all stood and looked at the old woman’s body where it lay, coiled into a foetal ball, in a scattering of curled-up wasps. The mist was starting to fade.

‘Is she dead?’ asked Gleave.

‘Oh, I should think so,’ the Doctor replied. ‘The psionic gas is pretty effective at such close range.’

He knelt down to examine the body.

Which suddenly reared up with a terrific roar, disgorging yet more wasps right into the Doctor’s face. He fell backwards, Miss Havers leaping on top of him like a crazed animal, snapping and snarling and foaming at the mouth.

More wasps poured out of her as she bit down at his exposed throat.

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Chapter Thirty-three

Fatboy had positioned himself high in the church’s roof, where there was ample cover. His SNS suit was useless now, so he had taken to the shadows. The moment the second code word had been received, the artificial intelligence generated in his positronic brain was diverted into a functionless subroutine.

After that, everything became secondary to his basic program – the one that governed his use as a tactical nuclear strike weapon.

So, while Fatboy still understood what fear was, he was utterly

incapable of feeling it. He could sense the heavy weight of the uranium 235 in his chest, but remained oblivious to even its rather obvious symbolism.

Instead he simply sat and waited, completely detached, watching the strange events unfolding beneath him without curiosity or fear or pity.

Liam Jarrow looked directly into Anji's eyes; he didn't dare look to where Charles Rigby was squatting on the far side of the loft space.

There were wasps flying all around them, but he really didn't care about those. They were nothing compared with the beast crouched in the shadows no less than six feet away from them both. It was almost impossible to think of the thing as Charles Rigby any more. He could hear it gurgling and buzzing softly to itself, hear the many hundreds of insects crawling all over its disgusting shape. If he closed his eyes he would imagine what it might look like, so he resolutely kept them open and staring at Anji Kapoor.

'It's going to be all right,' she told him quietly, but there was a tremor in her voice. She didn't believe what she was saying, and why should she? They were going to die up here, all alone, and no one knew or cared.

A sob escaped from his throat, a dry gasp of confounded innocence. He had been let down in every respect: he had no father; his mother had married the wrong man in his father's place; Liam's only real friend had turned into something monstrous.

Even the mysterious Doctor and his promise that everything would be all right had proved to be nothing more than an outrageous lie.

But, worst of all, he'd let himself down.

He had promised himself – vowed – that he would live up to the memory of his real father, the army officer who was decorated for his bravery in the Great War; a man for whom courage had been second nature, as easy as breathing or eating.

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For his son, it had proved not only an effort, but, in the end, a complete impossibility.

Liam had lacked that courage. In the face of danger, and horror, and death, he had allowed himself to succumb to fear. He had been

terrified. He still was terrified. He feared the thing that Rigby had turned into, feared what it would do to him, feared what the future might hold. And even if he was to survive, by some miracle. . . what then? He would have to live with the knowledge that he had proved himself to be nothing more than a coward, a quivering little boy unable to cope with anything but his own dreams.

Like Hilary Pink. A conchie and a traitor. A coward.

‘Liam,’ said Anji. ‘Look at me.’

Startled, he focused on Anji again.

‘We’re still alive,’ she told him. ‘That’s all that matters. There’s still a chance we can get out of this.’

He shook his head and clutched hold of the wooden beam more tightly.

‘No,’ urged Anji, ‘don’t give up. Just keep cool. You’ll be all right. We both will. . .’

But he could tell she still didn’t really believe it.

Unable to hold back any longer, Liam began to weep. ‘Oh, Dad, I’m sorry. . .’

I’m so sorry. . .’

Miss Havers bore down on the Doctor like a rabid dog, determined to inflict lethal injury. Her fingers, curled into steel-hard claws, tore at his throat with a terrible ferocity. For a long moment he lay pinned under her wasp-infected body, while the others looked on, frozen in appalled horror. The old woman’s wicked snarling filled the transept like an unleashed demon.

Then a great blast of white vapour engulfed them both, and Miss Havers let out a piteous scream. As the mist swirled away, she reared up with her head flung back and her fingers slashing at the air. A keening wail filled the church as she staggered backwards, shuddering and convulsing. Then the cries turned into an agonised choke; and seconds later a stream of thick yellow slime burst from her throat, ejected high into the air. For a moment longer she was racked with uncontrollable spasms before she finally collapsed on the cold stone floor. She lay there and writhed, regurgitating a final slew of wasps over the flagstones before finally lying still.

The Doctor clambered slowly to his feet, clutching the fire extinguisher to his chest. His waistcoat and cravat were all rumpled again.

‘And you say you *hugged* her?’ said Fitz incredulously.

The Doctor nodded weakly.

Inspector Gleave was cautiously approaching the old woman’s body. It gave a final rattle and then seemed to deflate as the last vestiges of life deserted it.

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‘I wouldn’t get too close,’ advised the Doctor.

‘She is dead?’ the policeman asked, unsure.

‘Undoubtedly – this time.’ The Doctor examined his psionic gas extinguisher regretfully. ‘I gave her the lot.’

‘Well it certainly seemed to do the trick,’ Fitz said.

Anji gritted her teeth together in frustration. This would be her best opportunity for escape so far. Rigby was in some kind of trance, a dim shape in the corner seething with wasps. He hadn’t moved much in the last few minutes, and she thought that he must have been undergoing some sort of final stage in his transformation.

So now, surely, would be the best time to try to get away. There was a trapdoor or something set into the part of the loft space that had floorboards

– she could see light shining up through the square hole behind her. In fact, that was what provided most of the available light up here, and in some ways she was glad there wasn’t more. She didn’t fancy a closer look at whatever it was Charles Rigby had finally become. But the trapdoor was within reach –

just a few steps away, in fact, if she could somehow twist around and crawl through the crisscross of wooden beams separating her from it.

There was one thing stopping her, however: she couldn’t make a break for it without Liam Jarrow. But Liam’s nerve had well and truly broken, and no matter what she said he didn’t seem to be able to snap out of his misery.

‘Come on,’ she hissed at him. ‘Now’s our chance, Liam. Let’s not waste it!’

He stared back at her through his tears and dumbly shook his head.

Anji cursed him inwardly and tried to manoeuvre herself so that she could look down through the trapdoor.

Then she got quite a shock.

She could see all the way down to the floor of the church. The roof space they were in must have been positioned somewhere over the nave, quite near the altar.

And, from here, she could hear the voices of some people moving around down below.

As the Reverend Ernest Fordyke approached Miss Havers’s body, he held his hands clasped tightly together, as if in prayer, but the fingers and knuckles were white. Tears were running down his face. ‘The poor, poor woman,’ he whispered. ‘God have mercy on her soul.’

‘If it’s any consolation,’ the Doctor told him, ‘she probably won’t have been fully aware of what was happening to her.’

Fordyke wiped his nose. ‘I still don’t know exactly what *did* happen to her,’

he said bitterly.

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The Doctor’s lips compressed into a thin line, and he gently rested a hand on the clergyman’s shoulder.

‘Doctor,’ called Fitz. ‘You’d better come and see Kala. . . .’

Kala was still sitting on a pew, with her head between her knees. She sat up as the Doctor approached, and he saw that her face was covered with wasp stings. ‘I bet those hurt,’ he said.

She shot him a dark look from beneath hooded eyes. ‘It’s nothing compared to what happened to her,’ she said, indicating the prone form of Miss Havers.

‘I got off lightly by the looks of it. Thanks.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

‘Just promise me one thing, Doctor: if we get through all this in one piece, we go our separate ways and never clap eyes on each other again.’ She opened one eye. ‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’ The Doctor fished in his pocket and pulled out Jode’s chronometer. ‘However, our chances of getting out of all this in one piece, as you put it, are growing slimmer by the second. There’s now less than twenty minutes to go until Fatboy detonates.’

‘And how long until Rigby’s metamorphosis is complete?’

‘That’s anybody’s guess,’ the Doctor said, and looked upwards into the darkness of the roof space. ‘But it’s time to deal with both of them.’

Fitz licked his lips nervously. ‘At the same time?’

‘Have you a better suggestion?’ The Doctor tidied his cravat and pulled his waistcoat straight.

‘Wait,’ said Kala suddenly, holding up a hand for silence. ‘I think I can hear something.’

‘It’s the wasps,’ said Fitz.

‘No. Something else. Listen: voices.’

Anji had crept as far as she could towards the trapdoor. Any further now and she risked making some sort of vibration – her boots on the wooden planking would surely be enough to alert Rigby.

She decided on one last attempt to coerce Liam into joining her.

‘Liam, we’ve got to go *now*. There are people down there in the church. We can escape!’

He looked at her with wide, fear-filled eyes. ‘I’m too scared. I can’t move.’

‘Yes you can! You’ve got to! I don’t want to go without you, Liam, but I’m not waiting here for *him* to wake up.’ She gestured towards the hulking creature buzzing in the shadows. ‘It’s now or never!’

‘I think my wrist’s broken,’ he sobbed.

‘We can get out through the trapdoor,’ Anji told him. ‘It’s not far. You

can make it!’ She turned and craned her neck over the hole, looking directly down 218

into the church. ‘Liam!’ Anji hissed suddenly. ‘Your mother’s down there. I can see your mum!’

This galvanised Liam into action with a cry of relief.

He positively flew towards the trapdoor.

And so did Charles Rigby.

A long black leg unfolded across the loft space with incredible speed, knocking Liam back and pinning him against the side of the roof. He squealed with pain.

‘*Stay where you are!*’ the creature snarled.

‘You’re right,’ said the Doctor, peering up at the scaffolding. It was impossible to see anything in the darkness. ‘Voices.’

‘It’s got someone up there with it!’ realised Gleave.

‘Liam,’ said Gwen Carlton. ‘It’s Liam.’

‘And Anji,’ added Fitz, listening carefully. ‘That’s Anji’s voice.’ He looked meaningfully at the Doctor, who simply nodded, once.

‘Well, come on, then – what are we waiting for?’ Fitz pointed to the Doctor’s psionic gas extinguisher. ‘Let’s get up there and give it to him.’

The Doctor shook his head sadly. ‘Sorry, Fitz. I used all the gas on Miss Havers. It’s empty.’

He tossed the exhausted canister to Fitz. ‘Well – what, then?’

‘We’ve got the creature trapped,’ said Kala. ‘Torch it.’

‘It’s an idea at that,’ admitted Gleave, turning to the Doctor. ‘Remember the mortuary?’

‘Whoa,’ said Fitz quickly. ‘You’re forgetting that Liam and Anji are up there too – not to mention a nuclear device somewhere ready and primed to detonate.’

‘And, might I remind you,’ said Fordyke tersely, ‘that this is still the

house of God.'

Gleave ground his teeth together in frustration. 'Then what *can* we do?'

Automatically he looked to the Doctor for some kind of answer.

But the Doctor had disappeared.

'Let go of Liam!' yelled Anji, only to be knocked back by another insectoid limb. Rigby rose up on his remaining legs and swung around to face her.

'Be quiet, human!'

The voice was a guttural whine, so completely unhuman that Anji felt herself actually shivering. Whatever the creature now was, it had left Charles Rigby far behind.

The thing pushed its head closer to her; it was now a grotesque, lozenge-shaped lump with bulbous eyes over wide, slime-drooling jaws. These opened 219

sideways between a pair of massive serrated pincers. As the creature neared Anji, the mandibles flexed powerfully at her. She had no doubt that one snip from those things could sever her head clean from her shoulders.

'Keep away,' she said, trying to sound confident and in control. In reality her voice was no more than a desperate, whispered plea.

Abruptly, Rigby twisted around, his uneven legs scuttling on the floorboards, to face Liam. The boy lay flat on his back, trembling and white with shock.

'Liaaammmmm!' growled the creature.

'G-go away,' Liam said. 'Go away. You're not Mr Rigby. . . '

It was a stupid, bizarre thing to say – but it seemed to have an effect. The monster reared up and snapped at the air with its mouth pincers, spitting and snarling incoherently.

'Mr Rigby was a good man,' Liam sobbed, apparently unable to stop himself.

Perhaps, as he faced certain death, he felt he had nothing to lose. 'He

helped me. He was my friend!’

‘ *Pathetic infant!* ’

‘He knew my father. He was a brave man!’

‘ *Father!* ’ spat the creature derisively. A swarm of wasps flew around it, buzzing madly, almost appearing to be sharing in their master’s scorn. ‘ *I knew your father. Your real father. . .* ’

Liam stared back, his mouth hanging open, his lower lip quivering.

‘ *My wasps shared his body for a while. . . shared his thoughts, and memories, and dreams. . .* ’ Rigby leaned closer to Liam, the wasps swirling around both monster and boy as if tying them together with invisible threads. ‘ *His name was. . . Hilary Pink. . .* ’

Unbelievably, Liam actually let out a harsh laugh. He shook his head, as if finding sudden, unexpected strength in the denial of such a blatant untruth.

‘Hilary Pink was a lousy, drunken conchie,’ he said, his voice rising to a yell.

The whites of his eyes showed all around the irises in the gloom.

‘ *A coward and a traitor to his country,* ’ agreed Rigby. ‘ *And your father.* ’

‘You’re wrong,’ said Liam simply, as certain as he had ever been about anything.

‘ *Ask your mother,* ’ said Rigby. ‘ *If you won’t believe me.* ’

This seemed to hit Liam like a blow to the solar plexus.

Anji was biting her lip so hard she could taste blood. She was looking at Liam as he perched on the brink of. . . what? Madness? She could tell that there was the tiniest crack of doubt in those glassy, fearful eyes now. Eyes that were the exact same golden-brown as Hilary Pink’s had been.

‘Don’t believe him, Liam,’ she said thickly. ‘He’s lying.’

‘I know,’ said Liam.

Rigby twisted around and lunged at Anji, jaws snapping together with a terrific crunch.

With an equally savage cry, Liam hurled himself at the creature, ramming it with sufficient force to spoil its aim. The mandibles closed on a wooden beam, almost snapping it in two. Anji screamed as the platform rocked. Rigby shook himself free of the boy, and Liam tumbled away, slipping through the next set of rafters and plunging through the gap.

He grabbed hold of the nearest beam, but his left wrist was mangled beyond use. He slipped again and managed to crook his broken arm around the wood, halting his fall with a jarring wrench. He howled; but the fear of falling one hundred feet to his death was worse than the agonising pain in his arm and shoulder.

For a moment he hung there, swinging, feet dangling over the transept.

Then a startled cry rose up from the church as Gwen Jarrow saw him.

‘ *Liam!* ’

He started to slip; he couldn’t hold on like this. His arm was starting to weaken and he could feel the blood pounding in his head.

Anji scrambled across the floorboards towards him; she had to grab hold of him and somehow pull him back up.

But a sturdy black leg stamped down on her, pinning her to the floorboards.

Rigby tore his jaws free of the beam, dragging long splinters of wood away in his mouth, and bent down over her. Thick, evil-smelling saliva spattered the planking next to her face.

And then the wasps poured out.

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Chapter Thirty-four

‘All right,’ said the Doctor, ‘that’s enough!’

His voice cut through the noise like a scalpel – sharp and precise.

His head and shoulders were poking up through the trapdoor, his

long, aristocratic features uplit by the light of the church below. There was a grim set to his angular jaw.

For a moment the scene was frozen before him: the monster hunched over Anji like a beast of prey. Anji recoiling, terrified. Liam hanging by his injured arm, clearly about to drop.

And there were wasps everywhere. Hundreds of them. They swarmed around the Doctor as he climbed up through the trapdoor and into the loft space.

‘Now then,’ he said amiably as he dusted himself down. ‘What’s going on?’

The Rigby creature roared and turned back, away from Anji’s cowering form. Its legs unfolded in an ungainly attempt to manoeuvre in the confined space, and the Doctor used the opportunity to duck neatly past it, weaving through the crossbeams, until he could get to Liam Jarrow.

‘Up you come,’ he said, reaching down and grasping the youth by the scruff of the neck. He hauled him back up on to the flooring with a determined heave, the veins in his neck standing out with the effort. Liam was groaning with the pain from his broken wrist, and quite possibly a dislocated shoulder as well.

The Doctor pulled him around and looked deep into the boy’s eyes. ‘There,’

he said. ‘I told you I’d come.’

Then he pushed Liam gently but firmly back towards the trapdoor, urging him along as the Rigby creature thrashed and snarled and spat at them. ‘*Doc-torrrrr. . .*’

‘Just be patient,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘I’ll get to you in a minute.’

He helped Liam through the trapdoor, where Fitz was waiting to help him down.

‘Doctor. . .’ said Anji. Her voice sounded small and weak in the darkness.

The Doctor looked sharply around as Rigby closed in on him. The Doctor nipped back behind one of the supporting beams, neatly avoiding the creature’s snapping jaws.

‘*Doc-torrrrr*. . . ’ it gurgled murderously.

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‘Oh, dear,’ said the Doctor, crossing over to where Anji crouched. His eyes never left the creature. ‘You’ve got it bad, haven’t you?’

Anji grasped the Doctor’s arms instinctively, closing her fingers around the soft velvet of his jacket as hard as she could. It was as if somewhere inside her she had to be sure that he was real, and not just a figment of her imagination.

‘Oh, God,’ she murmured. ‘I thought you were going to leave us. . . ’

‘Never,’ he replied.

‘Trust you to arrive at just past the last moment,’ she smiled weakly.

‘Not quite,’ he said.

‘Don’t tell me there’s worse to come!’

He just gave her a tight smile and patted her arm. ‘Don’t worry, we’ll be all right.’

‘It’s too late, isn’t it?’

‘No. It’s never too late.’

‘I’m so scared. . . ’

‘Hey.’ He cupped her face in his hands and held her gaze. She looked intently, deep into his eyes, as though seeking further reassurance. ‘There’s no need to be scared: I’m here.’

She shook her head. ‘R-Rigby. . . ’

‘Don’t let him bother you. He’s just a monster.’

But her eyes were widening in alarm as she looked over his shoulder. ‘I mean, look out!’

The creature that had been Charles Rigby swiped the Doctor aside like a rag doll. It raked its forelegs across the loft space in a slashing frenzy. The Doctor crawled backwards until he came up against the side of the steeple wall, and then, finally, he held up a hand.

‘That’s far enough, Rigby,’ he ordered. All trace of flippancy had vanished; in its place was a steely resolve.

‘ *There is no Rig-beee. . .* ’ answered the creature.

‘We need to talk, the Doctor went on, ignoring him.

The wasps had returned to the creature now, covering it in a living crust of insects. They were flying freely in and out of the gaping maw. Parts of the creature’s torso were distorting beneath the layer of wasps, opening up to reveal more slavering jaws and the beginnings of stubby, jointed yellow legs.

For a moment the Doctor stared at the process in fascination, until the thing began to speak again.

‘ *I am nearly complete,* ’ it drawled heavily. Wasps swam in the bubbling gruel that filled its mouth and dripped on to the floor.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘You’ll never be complete,’ he said. ‘You can’t be complete. Not here, not like this.’

The beast let out a hissing growl.

224

‘No no no,’ said the Doctor hastily, ‘listen to me: there’s something you don’t know about.’

The Rigby thing continued to advance on the Doctor, its legs scratching across the floorboards and its mandibles clacking.

‘Fatboy,’ said the Doctor clearly. ‘Where are you?’

‘Over here, Doctor.’

The voice came from the far recesses of the roof space, slightly above them.

Anji was so surprised she forgot about Rigby for a moment. Peering into the shadows, she suddenly realised there was someone else up here with them –

a thin, youthful figure in a jumpsuit and boots.

Astonished, she realised that he must have been up here all the time. And yet he had never said a word or moved – not even to help them

when Rigby had attacked Liam.

‘Who is it?’ she asked.

‘Not who,’ corrected the Doctor. ‘What. He’s called Fatboy, and he’s a nuclear bomb.’

Now that she could see this Fatboy person, Anji could discern a little more detail – she quickly got the impression of a very young man, but his face was badly scarred and there was metal visible beneath the burned skin. In the darkness she could see a little red light blinking steadily.

‘Nuclear bomb?’ she repeated.

‘Yes. And his timer’s running.’ The Doctor fished out Jode’s chronometer and checked the reading. ‘According to this, we’ve got just eleven minutes before he detonates. Is that right, Fatboy?’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘How come he can talk?’ asked Anji.

‘Smart bomb,’ the Doctor replied. ‘Don’t be fooled, he’s just a machine. A robot.’

‘Creepy. Hadn’t you better switch him off, or something?’

‘I can’t.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Fatboy is a last-resort weapon installed here by a team of commandos sent back in time from the far future.’ The Doctor was speaking nineteen to the dozen. ‘Once he’s been armed and the countdown’s started, nothing will stop it. Isn’t that right, Fatboy?’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘He’s even programmed to resist any attempt to defuse him,’ went on the Doctor. ‘If I make a move towards him he’ll kill me without compunction. Isn’t that right, Fatboy?’

‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘So you see, we’ve got quite a conundrum here. There’s a nuclear device ticking away on one side. . .

and the monster formerly known as Charles

Rigby on the other. We’re trapped between two artificially intelligent weapons of mass destruction.’

For a long moment there was silence in the loft – save for the drone of the wasps and Rigby’s gurgling, stertorous breath.

‘I really thought you’d come to save us,’ said Anji in a small, disappointed voice.

‘We’re not beaten yet.’ The Doctor squeezed her hand and turned back to Rigby, holding up the chronometer and dangling it by the strap in front of the creature’s swaying antennae. ‘Nine minutes, Rigby. Then we’ll all be blown into atoms. This entire area will be completely levelled. Everything else within a twenty-kilometre radius of this church will go up in flames. This really is the end.’

‘A desperate ploy, Doc-tor,’ rattled the creature. *‘But I am not so easily swayed. . . I am on the point of achieving my destiny. My apotheosis. . .’*

‘Your apotheosis?’ The Doctor gave a short, harsh laugh. ‘That’s pretty grand for an insect, if you don’t mind me saying.’

‘I am no mere insect, Doc-tor! I am – I am –’ The beast faltered for a moment, coughing up wasps and nervously flexing its spiky legs.

‘You are what?’ asked the Doctor. ‘Go on. This is very interesting. What, exactly, are you now?’

The creature rumbled and buzzed deep in its distorted abdomen. Shapes bulged beneath the toughened flesh, mouths and limbs sprouting from beneath the skin of wasps.

‘You don’t know, do you?’ pressed the Doctor, moving a little closer. ‘You have no idea what you really are. But I do.’

For a moment they faced each other, no more than inches apart, the Doctor glaring into the beast’s pulsating red eyes.

‘You’re the product of a device designed to create a mutant life form,’ the Doctor said. ‘An appalling weapon from the distant future which uses bioengineered psionic energy to control and alter any life form it

comes into contact with. I don't really know how it ended up here. It doesn't actually matter.

But by sheer fluke, it infected a nest of wasps. Just your everyday, common English garden wasps.'

The Doctor had moved fractionally closer to Rigby. Some of the wasps circling the creature landed on the Doctor and began to crawl over his head and shoulders. He ignored them. 'But the weapon is only supposed to be used against human beings. So the infected wasps have tried to take over every human being they came into contact with. They were rarely successful. In 226

fact it only worked twice. But you were the first. You were the experiment.

And look at the result.'

The creature thrashed and squirmed, the wasps buzzing agitatedly around its head.

'Do you remember that, Charles?' The Doctor's sudden, unexpected use of the man's first name made Anji jump. It was difficult to believe that this terrible being had once been an ordinary man.

'Do you, Charles?' the Doctor repeated. Wasps were crawling over his face and in his hair. Anji didn't know how he could ignore them. She watched, hardly able to breathe, as the Doctor moved closer still. He now faced the creature across the open trapdoor, the light from below catching each of them in a baleful glow. The Doctor's long, sad-looking face and the bestial insectoid features of Charles Rigby were both thrown into sharp relief.

'I'll make a deal with you, Charles,' said the Doctor. 'If you let me have the device, I'll try to defuse the nuclear bomb.'

'*The human called Charlzrigbee no longer exists,*' spluttered the creature.

'All right,' said the Doctor levelly. 'Then I'll speak to whatever it is that he's become. If it's not Rigby, or even the wasps, then it must be the controlling force behind them – the bio-psionic energy field housed in that device from the future.'

'*I am listening, Doc-tor. . .*'

‘Good, good. Because we don’t have a lot of time. Let me have the device.’

The creature’s antennae waved uncertainly. ‘*Impossible.*’

‘Don’t be silly.’ The Doctor edged a little closer, licking dry lips. In the light of the trapdoor, his skin was glistening with perspiration. ‘The device is damaged. Look. I’ve got a piece of it here.’

Slowly the Doctor held up the broken fragment between his finger and thumb. It glinted a dull green.

‘The device needs to be whole again,’ he said. ‘Then it can function properly.’

Your transformation will be completed.’

‘*I am complete.*’

‘No, you’re not. Look at you. Bits bulging out everywhere. You must be in a lot of pain, too.’

‘*I will survive. . .*’

‘I’ve no doubt. But what as? You’re trapped in a hostile environment, struggling to exist, enduring terrible pain. . . Confused. Angry. But most of all, without purpose. You’ve been created by something designed to subvert and kill and destroy, but the enemy isn’t here. You’re in the wrong place and time.’

The creature clicked its mandibles and shook its massive head.

‘Things can be better for you,’ the Doctor said. ‘But the device needs to be repaired. Only then can you be truly complete. Free of all the pain and 227

confusion. . .’

The creature remained motionless.

‘Let me have the device,’ urged the Doctor. ‘Let me help you.’

He held out his hand towards the creature.

His eyes implored the thing that lived inside it to trust him. Perhaps some last, tiny vestige of Charles Rigby might have recognised the earnest look in those calm blue eyes.

The monster unfolded a long limb, the tip of it hooked around the dull black shape of the device. Slowly, uncertainly, it extended the limb.

The Doctor reached out a little further, nodding gentle encouragement.

The creature passed the device across the open Space, delicately placing it in the palm of the Doctor's outstretched hand.

'Sorry,' said the Doctor. And then he let go of the device.

It dropped like a stone through the open trapdoor, tumbling end over end towards the floor of the church one hundred feet below. When it struck the flagstones the device shattered into a thousand tiny pieces, scattering fragments right across the transept. A blaze of crackling green energy leapt from the point of impact and dissipated in an instant, leaving nothing more than a bright, formless residual shape in the eyes of those who were watching.

The creature convulsed and roared as the energy field lost focus and died.

It twisted with such ferocity that its thick, chitinous hide ruptured in several places. Gelatinous tissue spurted through the cracks as it reared up in massive, traumatic shock.

Then, with a blood-curdling screech, the thing toppled forward and plummeted through the floor of the loft, following the device all the way down to the flagstones below.

It hit the ground with a thunderous crack, its weight splitting the carapace wide open under the impact. For a moment the pallid meat inside it writhed, the thick black legs jerking and waving uselessly.

Then, with a final croak, it sagged and lay still.

The wasps that had fallen with their master, now freed of its control, broke away from the corpse and rose up in a cloud of random flight. With nothing to direct them, the insects flew away towards the nearest exit, instinctively heading for freedom.

In the loft space, the Doctor slowly closed the fingers of his still outstretched hand.

'Doctor,' said Anji urgently. 'The bomb!'

Chapter Thirty-five

‘Four minutes and fifty-seven seconds,’ said Anji, as the Doctor leapt up towards Fatboy.

The android seemed to stiffen slightly as the Doctor approached, perhaps recognising the possibility of a threat. In human terms, realised Anji, it was preparing to fight if it had to.

The Doctor held up a hand. ‘It’s over, Fatboy. The danger’s gone. You can abort the countdown!’

Fatboy shook his head, the motors in his neck clearly audible. ‘The countdown cannot be aborted.’

‘Four minutes forty seconds until detonation!’ stated Anji clearly.

‘Listen to me!’ the Doctor pleaded. ‘Kala and Jode were only to use you if the bio-psionic weapon was activated and all else had failed. You were a last resort. But the threat has gone. Your purpose is over!’

‘My purpose is to detonate in four minutes and thirty seconds.’

‘Fatboy!’ the Doctor moved closer. ‘You’ll be killing hundreds of thousands of people. Many more will die slowly and horribly. You *must* stop the countdown!’

Fatboy’s single remaining eye swivelled to focus on the Doctor. His features remained as impassive as a shop-window dummy as he said, ‘I cannot. Four minutes twenty seconds.’

‘You stupid machine!’ the Doctor grabbed the android’s shoulders in frustration, and Fatboy’s central computer processor interpreted the action as hostile intent. His own hands leapt up and fastened around the Doctor’s neck in a choke hold.

The Doctor grimaced and gagged as the robot’s steel fingers exerted their grip; the pressure was inexorable.

‘Stop it!’ yelled Anji, trying to pull the robot’s arms away, but Fatboy was incredibly strong.

‘Four minutes ten seconds,’ the robot intoned steadily, increasing the pressure of his grip as the Doctor tried to force his arms apart. But it was hopeless.

The Doctor's face was already a livid purple, his tongue lolling from his mouth between lips that were drawn back in a rictus of pain.

'Stop it! Let him go!' Anji punched the side of Fatboy's head as hard as she could, but succeeded only in producing a metallic clang that might have been 229

comical if the situation hadn't been so awful.

'Four minutes,' Fatboy announced, as the Doctor's eyes began to roll up beneath fluttering eyelids.

Then the robot simply stopped, as if all his power had been cut. His head slumped forward, and the hands fell away from the Doctor's neck.

The Doctor toppled backwards, unconscious.

For a moment Anji thought that Fatboy had abandoned the countdown, but she suddenly became aware of a faster, more urgent bleeping noise coming from deep inside his chest. The little LED in his left eye had also accelerated its blinking. Cold instinct told her that this was the final sequence of the countdown; that whatever machinery was stored inside him was completing the process that would arm and detonate the nuclear weapon.

She dragged her hands down her face in despair and turned to the Doctor.

Who was lying on the floor, out cold.

'What's going on?' asked a voice from the trapdoor. Anji jerked round to see Kala's head and shoulders poking through the square.

'It's your stupid bomb,' hissed Anji. 'It's about to go off!'

Kala clambered into the loft space and stared at the motionless Fatboy. The bleeping was getting faster and louder.

'We've got to wake him up!' said Anji. She pulled the Doctor's cravat away and loosened his collar. The flesh of his neck was a mottled white and red, the imprints of Fatboy's fingers still clearly visible. His face looked pale and sweaty, the skin around his lips blue with cyanosis.

She pulled open one of his eyelids, but all she could see was white.

‘Wake up!’ She slapped his face, gently at first, and then a bit harder as fear overtook her. ‘Wake up!’

‘Not like that,’ said Kala, gently moving her aside. ‘Like this!’ She drew back her right hand and belted the Doctor across the face as hard as she could. His head rolled on his shoulders. ‘Wake up, damn you!’

He groaned and his eyes flickered open.

‘Come on, Doctor!’ Anji shouted. ‘Get up! There’s no time to lie around –

you’ve got a nuclear bomb to defuse!’

‘Not again,’ he murmured.

Kala grabbed him by the lapels and heaved him upright. The Doctor’s head lolled freely before he gradually began to focus on her. He raised a trembling hand to his throat and winced. ‘What’s happening?’

‘You’ve got less than three minutes to stop him blowing up!’ shouted Anji, pointing at Fatboy. The robot was slumped over like a forgotten doll, an imperative bleeping emanating from his chest.

Galvanised into action, the Doctor batted the robot’s limp arms aside and tore the front of the camouflage tunic apart. The flesh beneath was pure white 230

and shone like plastic.

‘There’s a seal running along the top, just beneath the collarbone,’ said Kala urgently.

The Doctor grabbed the edge of the plastic and wrenched it down to reveal a metal ribcage.

Inside was something large and black, with a set of blinking LEDs. The fast-running bleeper was now much louder. Kala leaned forward and felt around the ribs, pressing something. The ribs parted at the sternum with a pneumatic hiss, opening out like the petals of a flower. Nestling in the chest cavity was the device itself, no more than the size and shape of a bowling ball – sleek, dark and deadly.

‘Over to you,’ Kala told the Doctor.

The Doctor produced his sonic screwdriver, whirling it through his

fingers as a cowboy would with a six-shooter, and swept it over the device. It emitted a shrill whine and something clicked inside the bomb.

‘Blast,’ he muttered, rather inappropriately, and quickly made an adjustment to the screwdriver. He tried it again, but this time there wasn’t even a click.

The LEDs continued to flash and bleep.

Anji didn’t dare look at the countdown watch. She hardly dared to breathe.

She just crouched and watched, unable to look away, as the Doctor bit his lip and fiddled with the sonic screwdriver.

‘What’s up?’ Kala demanded.

‘Looks like we’ll have to do it the hard way,’ he told them.

Anji and Kala just looked at each other.

‘This is basically your bog-standard nuke,’ the Doctor quickly explained as he set to work unscrewing something on the bomb casing. Two stable, subcritical lumps of uranium or plutonium which, when brought forcefully together here, will cause the critical mass to be exceeded, and thus initiate an uncontrolled nuclear-fission chain reaction.’

He tossed aside a number of small black screws and then adjusted the setting on the screwdriver. ‘That explosion will provide a high enough temperature to cause nuclear fusion in the surrounding solid layer of, in this case, lithium deuteride. The result: *bang!* to the order of several megatons. . . ’

He used the screwdriver to release some sort of latch and then stuffed it back in his pocket. Anji glanced nervously at the chronometer readout. Less than two minutes to go.

‘Now this,’ the Doctor said, tapping the surface of the black sphere, ‘is the actual detonator that will blast one lump of the fissionable material into the other. It works by completing a simple electrical circuit when the timer 231

reaches zero. The trick now is to remove it without accidentally completing the circuit.’

Anji licked her lips. 'How do you do that?'

'Very, *very* carefully.'

The Doctor grasped the edge of the disc gently between his fingertips and turned it clockwise. There was a distinct click as it came free. Then, very slowly, he began to pull it out. Anji and Kala watched as a slender metal rod began to emerge from its housing in the sphere. It was a very close fit.

'Careful. . . ' Kala's voice was barely a whisper.

'Fifty seconds,' said Anji breathlessly, suddenly remembering to check the countdown again.

'Whatever happens, I mustn't let it touch the edge. . . ' the Doctor whispered, hardly moving his lips. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes, making him blink rapidly.

The rod was nearly out. The Doctor continued to pull it with extreme caution.

The slightest tremble now and the circuit would be completed.

'Thirty seconds. . . '

And at that moment a wasp landed on his hand.

He froze.

Anji gritted her teeth so hard she thought she would be sick. She could feel her heart pounding, beating as fast as the bomb's own maddening bleeper.

Kala's eyes were wide with fear.

The wasp crawled around the Doctor's hand, over his knuckles, lapping away at the perspiration. The sharp tip of its yellow and black body rested against the skin. It pulsed rhythmically.

'It's getting ready to sting,' breathed Kala.

The Doctor looked as though he had been carved from stone; Anji couldn't even look at the countdown.

For long, agonising seconds they all stared at the wasp without moving.

Their whole attention was focused on the insect as it settled on the back of the Doctor's hand. Then, quite clearly, they all watched it dip its rear end down on to the skin and insert its needle-like sting.

The Doctor's eyes narrowed slightly.

The wasp withdrew its sting, a sticky thread of venom connecting it to the tiny wound for just a moment.

Then it flew off.

The detonator rod gave a loud click. When the Doctor turned to them he was holding up the rod, and they could see two metal prongs jutting out of its base.

'Ouch,' said the Doctor quietly.

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Anji looked down at the chronometer.

It said 00:00.

Fitz had helped Liam down from the roof easily enough, but the boy was badly injured and in terrible pain. His left arm hung uselessly, and the lad was shivering with fear and shock.

Fitz had done the natural thing and delivered the boy into the arms of his mother.

Gwen Carlton had sobbed with joy and relief, crushing her boy in an embrace that lasted several tearful minutes. Liam had returned the hug with his good arm, finally allowing himself to let go of the emotions that had been welling up inside him for hours on end.

Fitz had been treated like a hero, to his shame.

He had merely looked back up into the shadowy loft space and wondered what was happening up there. The Doctor had told him in no uncertain terms to leave him to it.

So he had waited down here, accepting the tears of gratitude from Liam's mother, smiling faintly at Squire Pink's appreciative nod.

But he knew it wasn't over yet.

There was only one way it could end. He hadn't really been all that

surprised when the creature that Charles Rigby had become fell to its death.

He'd helped cover the thing with an old tarpaulin fetched by Fordyke. The clergyman had crossed himself as they laid it over the broken remains. Miss Havers's body lay on the floor a few feet away, covered by an altar cloth.

It had to be said, the Doctor looked a little worse for wear. He had nevertheless smiled and gratefully shaken the hands of Inspector Gleave and Squire Pink.

Kala looked pale and drained. Anji, obviously shaken, merely sat down heavily on a pew and buried her face in her hands, utterly exhausted.

'What should be done with the body?' Gleave asked the Doctor grimly. He indicated the shapeless mass under the tarpaulin. A number of ugly stains were already seeping through the heavy material.

'Take it outside and burn it,' the Doctor replied, absently rubbing at the wasp sting on the back of his hand. 'The sooner the better.'

Gleave and Pink, with a couple of brawny coppers called in to help, immediately set about the task.

The Doctor watched, looking a little sad.

Fitz sat down next to Anji, who described, briefly, all that had happened.

Apart from some nasty bruising under the jaw, there was little to show for the Doctor's ordeal with Fatboy. But Anji was still trembling, although Fitz 233

explained that this was a normal, healthy reaction. 'It's just your body dealing with all that adrenaline and stuff.'

'Yeah.' Anji nodded weakly.

Kala watched the Doctor observing the removal of the creature's body and wondered what he was thinking. His eyes always looked so sad, it was difficult to tell. She pushed herself away from the pillar she had been leaning against and wandered over to him.

'Well, you did it,' she said.

The Doctor turned to look at her. ‘Thanks.’

‘For what?’

‘Coming up when you did.’

She regarded him steadily, trying to work out if he was genuinely grateful or not. ‘Think I’d cut and run?’

He considered this carefully for a moment. ‘No – but you don’t really belong here, any more than I do.’

‘But you still can’t help getting involved, can you?’

He frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Sure,’ she continued, ‘you saved the day – just like you said you would, without having to use the nuke.’

‘Actually, it wasn’t quite as simple as that. I had to *defuse* the nuke, remember.’

She took a deep breath. ‘You took one hell of a risk.’

‘What was there to lose? Do you think I should have just left Fatboy to do his worst?’

‘You were emotionally involved.’

The Doctor’s eyes widened. ‘Emotionally involved?’

‘With Rigby. With the boy. With your friends, with all the people round here. Everything! The whole damned planet, maybe, I don’t know.’ Kala felt herself becoming unaccountably angry with him. Perhaps it was because she had, indeed, considered running for the transduction point to escape the blast. But, for some reason, she had stayed put. In the end, she had had to see it through – *his* way.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, but there was a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

‘I just can’t help it.’

She tried not to smile back. ‘It just wasn’t very professional, that’s all.’

‘No,’ he agreed, ‘it wasn’t.’

'I'd better go,' she said abruptly. 'The transduction point's not far from here.'

And I seem to be surplus to requirements.'

'You never said exactly where or when you're from,' the Doctor pointed out.

'That's right, I didn't.'

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'Top secret, eh?'

'For the moment, you don't need to know.'

He smiled, evidently curious. 'I know you're a professional time traveller.'

'Let's just leave it at that for now, shall we?'

The Doctor glanced around the church, looking for his friends. 'It's probably for the best, yes.'

'Will you be going too, then? In your police box?'

He nodded. 'Soon.'

'What if I said I wanted to come with you? In your police box?'

'You've seen inside it,' he said. 'There's plenty of room.'

She pursed her lips and pretended to consider the option. 'Nah, I don't think so. I've got a job to do.' She gazed steadily at him. 'But who knows? In our line of business, we may meet again.'

'I doubt it,' he said. 'I'm strictly amateur.'

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Chapter Thirty-six

'I don't think I can thank you enough,' said Gwen Carlton earnestly.

'That's all right,' said Anji lamely. 'Don't mention it.'

Gwen shook her head, and dabbed at her eyes again with her handkerchief.

She had lost nearly everything – husband, house and son. But Liam had been given back to her from the very jaws of death and she was almost pathetically grateful. ‘No, I mean it. If it weren’t for you and your friends, then I wouldn’t be here at all. And Liam certainly wouldn’t.’

She squeezed her son closer, and he gave Anji an embarrassed smile. Liam looked a bit wan, but otherwise a million times better than when she had last seen him in the church roof. His wrist had been bandaged and was awaiting the attention of a district nurse from Penton.

The events of that afternoon already seemed like a long way distant in both time and space, Anji thought. Almost as if it had all been a terrible nightmare from which everyone was only just awakening.

They had all eventually gravitated back to the Pink House, where there was ample room for them all. Inspector Gleave had already based his operations there anyway, and it was somewhere for Gwen Carlton and Liam to stay. Fitz and Anji had come back here, too, while the Doctor had stayed behind to ‘tidy up a few things’, as he put it. In fact this meant clearing up the broken debris strewn across the floor of the church, and, more awkwardly, the safe disposal of Fatboy’s remains. Now even he had returned, and, after collecting a much-needed cup of tea, was talking to Inspector Gleave and Fitz on the other side of the room.

Inevitably there was a sense of excitement, if not celebration, among those who had survived.

Anji smiled again at Liam and his mother. She felt extremely awkward: she wanted Liam to know that his father had been Hilary Pink. But Hilary’s desperate last words to her – as he died in agony in Charles Rigby’s living room – echoed loudly in her mind: ‘ *Don’t tell Liam!* ’

She’d kept that unspoken promise. Rigby himself – or the thing that had occupied and changed him into a monster – had tried to tell Liam the truth, but its motives had been purely vindictive. For her own part, Anji simply couldn’t bring herself to compound the awfulness that had swamped the kid’s 237

life in the last twenty-four hours. She clearly remembered the look in his eyes

– a boy pushed to the very edge of madness by fear and shame. He still had that look now, although it was beginning to diminish,

thankfully. When Anji smiled at him, there was a flicker of recognition, of comfort.

She noticed then that Gwen was still smiling at her; was there something in her tearful eyes that hinted at an even deeper gratitude? Could she see Anji's indecision, sense that she knew the truth?

'Not interrupting, am I?' said Squire Pink, stepping up next to Anji.

'What? I mean, no – of course not.'

'Thought I ought to offer my thanks, too,' the Squire said with a sad smile.

'While we're on the subject.'

Anji looked at him. Again she felt there was a subtext here. Perhaps Pink, too, felt it would be unfair to Hilary's memory to burden Liam with the knowledge of an unwanted father.

'That's all right,' Anji said eventually 'My pleasure. . . '

'Good-o.' Pink nodded. 'I'd like to offer my apologies as well, if I may.' Anji looked puzzled. 'For being so rude to you. . . that night.'

'Forget it. You were upset. It's me who should be saying sorry – about Hilary.'

Pink gave an embarrassed cough. 'Well, I'm sorry for doubting you – and your friends. Will you be staying for the funeral?'

Anji was caught unawares. She really hadn't expected that, and felt herself stammering. 'I don't know, actually. Probably not.' She automatically looked across the room at the Doctor. He was staring reflectively out into the garden, sipping his cup of tea. Now that all the excitement was over, he seemed to have returned to his former state of ennui.

'Yes,' she heard Squire Pink saying, 'I've been wondering about your Doctor friend. . . who is he, exactly?'

'Er. . . '

'And where did you all come from, anyway? I don't think you ever told me.'

'No,' said Anji. 'I'm more concerned about where we're going, to be

honest.'

She excused herself then, and left the room, heading for the garden.

'Rum sort of gal,' commented Pink.

'I think she's an angel,' said Gwen appreciatively. 'She and her friends.'

Pink raised an eyebrow. 'Thought they were gypsies. Travellers of some kind, at any rate. . . '

'So how exactly did you defeat Rigby, Doctor?' Inspector Gleave asked. 'It must have been a mammoth scrap up there.'

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The Doctor turned away from his study of the garden and regarded the policeman sourly. 'Charles Rigby was a very innocent victim in all this, Inspector,'

he said. 'I only ever tried to help him.'

'But still. . . '

'What did they do with his body?' asked Fitz quickly.

'Burned it,' said Gleave. 'That's what we had to do with Hilary Pink and the others.'

'And Miss Havers?' asked Fitz.

'Mr Fordyce won't countenance anything other than a proper burial,' the Doctor said.

'Bit risky, isn't it?' asked Gleave.

'I shouldn't worry about it,' said the Doctor. 'Once the device was destroyed, all the wasps were returned to normal. There's no danger now.'

'All right,' Gleave said. 'If you're sure. . . '

'I am.' The Doctor smiled briefly. It was clear that he wasn't too keen on any more questions. His attention seemed to have been distracted by something on the far side of the room. He handed his cup and saucer to Fitz, saying,

‘Excuse me,’ and then slipped away.

He caught up with her outside, in the garden. ‘Anji. Are you all right?’

‘Just need some fresh air,’ she muttered thickly. Then she stopped and turned to face him, her black eyes accusing. ‘What do you care, anyway?’

‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘Then why do I get the impression that none of them mean anything to you?’

She made a vague, angry gesture at the people inside the Pink House. ‘How many people lost their lives during all this?’

‘I’m not interested in body counts, Anji. None of this was my fault.’

She sighed. ‘I know that. And I know you put a stop to it. You always do.’

He frowned. ‘Then. . . what?’

‘Sometimes just saving lives isn’t enough, Doctor. Sometimes it would be nice if you actually cared about the lives you save. Who they are, what they are. And then spared a thought for the ones that don’t make it.’

‘I see,’ he said. ‘Is this about Hilary?’

‘No it isn’t,’ she snapped. ‘It’s about *you*. You’re already itching to get away

– I can tell you are. You sorted out the wasps, Rigby, and defused the bomb.

Hurrah. But now you just want to get out. I bet if you had your way, you’d just head straight back to the TARDIS and push off out of here. Without even saying goodbye to anyone.’

‘That’s unfair. And besides which, if you want to stay, we can. . . ’

She shook her head. ‘I don’t. I just wish you’d get a bit more involved sometimes.’

He laughed softly at this, which surprised her. She didn't really know why she felt so irritated; maybe it was just a reaction, as Fitz had clumsily suggested. It must make her seem so ungrateful. So unpredictable. And so human.

Maybe that was what the Doctor found so amusing.

'I'd really given up on you, you know,' she told him. 'Up there, when it was just Liam and me with that. . . thing. I honestly believed you weren't going to show.'

He looked at her in all seriousness. 'Never give up on me,' he said. But she couldn't tell whether it was an instruction or a request.

'You didn't give up on Rigby, did you?' she realised. 'You tried to get through to him, right to the end.'

He shrugged. I had to try. But, in the end, he'd gone. The biopsionic energy in the device had completely subsumed him. All that was left was that monstrosity, controlled by an artificially engineered life form.'

'Did you have to trick it?'

'I'm afraid so. Destroying the device was the only option left. The force that existed within it – and ultimately inside Charles Rigby – couldn't be allowed to exist on Earth. Its only purpose was to multiply and destroy. It would have eventually consumed the entire planet.'

'Squire Pink wants to know if we're staying for Hilary's funeral.'

'Do you want to?'

Anji glanced back at the house. She could see Pink in the window, nodding and talking to Gwen Carlton. 'No. To be honest, I think it would be an imposition.'

Anji's gaze had come to rest on Liam Jarrow. The boy was sitting close to his mother, looking pale and sorry for himself. It didn't suit him: his father had never seemed so forlorn. She let out a sigh and heard the Doctor saying something softly behind her.

"The truly brave are soft of heart and eyes, And feel for what their duty bids them do."

She looked back at him. 'Shakespeare?'

He shook his head. ‘Lord Byron. Not that it matters. It’s what it means that counts.’

‘Perhaps you should have a word with Liam,’ Anji suggested awkwardly.

‘No. He’ll work it out for himself soon enough.’ The Doctor said this as though it was historical fact rather than simple conjecture. He was watching the other people talking inside the house now. Fitz was still stuck with the dour Inspector Gleave. ‘These people have had enough of us for now. I think it’s time we left them to it, don’t you?’

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Anji sighed. ‘I suppose so.’ She knew that, if they stayed too long, the inevitable awkward questions would start. Squire Pink’s curiosity was already piqued.

The Doctor cleared his throat and said, ‘You know, we’re only a few decades from your own time. I could try to persuade the TARDIS to make a short hop to 2001.’

‘No.’

The effect was remarkable. She actually saw the Doctor’s eyes glittering like sapphires. Within an instant, the ennui had vanished, almost as though a weight had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders.

‘At the moment,’ she continued, ‘all I want is a hot bath and a good night’s sleep.’

He put his arm around her shoulder, gently steering her back towards the house. ‘Come on,’ he whispered. ‘Let’s rescue Fitz and get back to the TARDIS.’

And, while you’re having a nice soak, I’ll take us to somewhere on the other side of the galaxy. How does that sound?’

Anji smiled. ‘I can live with it.’

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Trevor Baxendale’s first Doctor Who novel, *The Janus Conjunction*, was published in 1998. *Coldheart* followed in 2000, and he also contributed ‘The Queen of Eros’ to the last short-story anthology published by BBC Worldwide, *Doctor Who: Short Trips and Side Steps*.

Eater of Wasps is his third Eighth Doctor adventure.

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